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PUBLISHED EVERY
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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
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Vol. LXXVI.

CHRIS CREWLEY'S WINNING HAND. — BY A. P. MORRIS —



SHE SAW A SMALL, WHITE HAND, WITH A SINGLE TONGUE OF FLAME ASCENDING FROM THE PALM.

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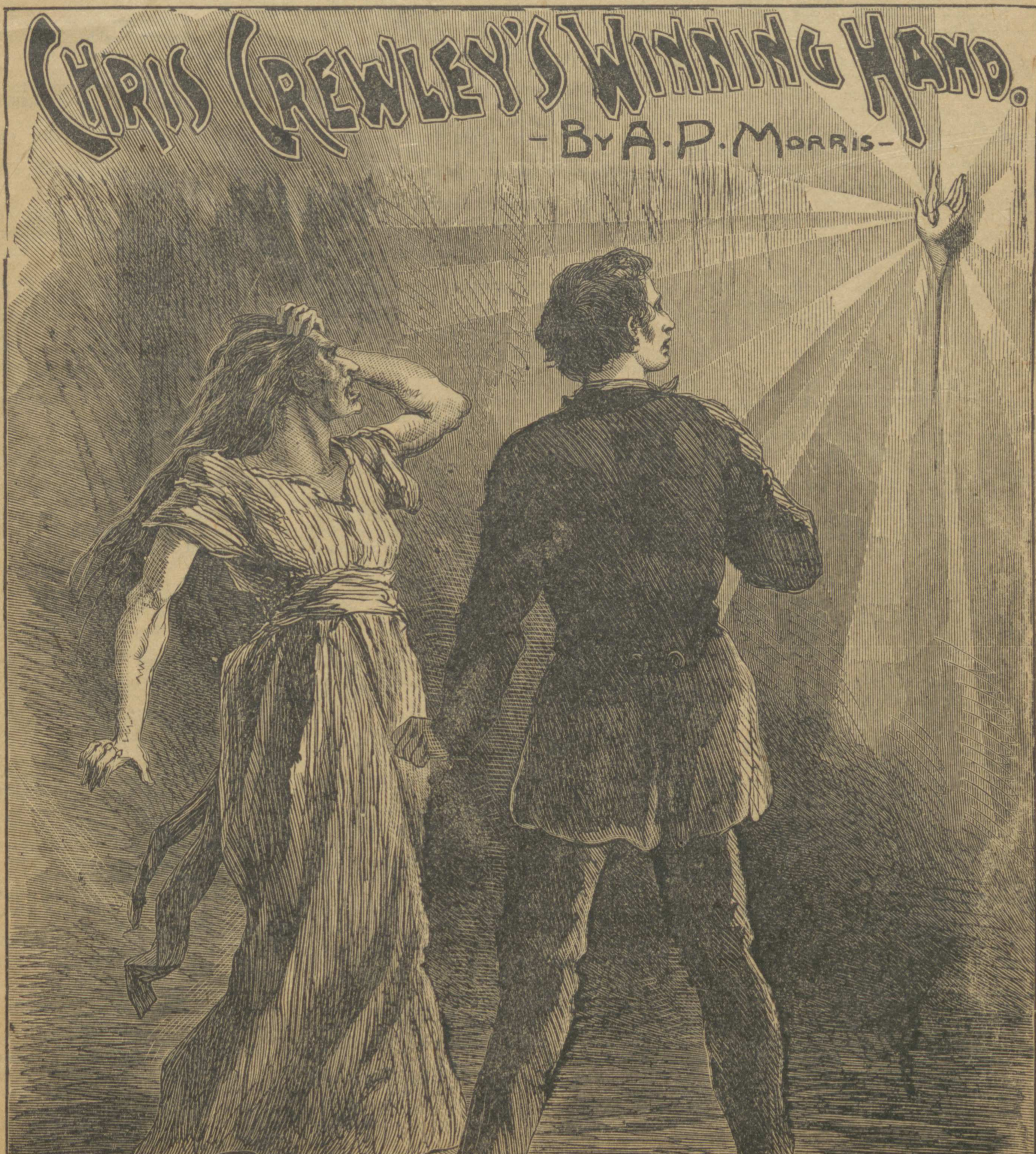
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SHE SAW A SMALL, WHITE HAND, WITH A SINGLE TONGUE OF FLAME ASCENDING FROM THE PALM.

Chris Crewley's Winning Hand;

OR,

The Rascally Valet's Double Game.

A Story of Detective Life in Washington.

BY A. P. MORRIS, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE QUEEN OF THE TAPESTRIED ROOM.

"'Tis true, he ever lingers at her side,
But mark the wandering glances of his eye:
A lover near a fond and plighted bride,
With less of love than sorrow in his sigh!"
—LAWSON.

"I will forget thee! All dear recollections
Pressed in my heart, like flowers within a
book,
Shall be torn out and scattered to the winds!"
—LONGFELLOW.

DARKNESS, storm and wind. Fast flashed
the lightning, loud the great artillery of
heaven rent the storm-tossed air.

Winds were shrieking like unrested de-
mons, and a dreary alto blended in the
sounds that told of snarling wolves hied on
by Jove.

It was a night of wet and chill. A quick,
sharp, lurid flame—a fearful crash; the rum-
bling thunder shook the cowering earth; the
watchman on his lonely beat felt unmanned,
despite his oft-tried courage; and above the
howling blast, like a sepulchral groan,

"The iron tongue of midnight had tolled
twelve!"

Close-shut in window and door, rearing
its ancient angles like spectral shadows,
stood a commodious, square-built house at
the corner of Main and — streets, in the
city of Richmond.

Its situation was rather a deserted one—a
space of several lots on either side. Front,
back and sides of the building were dark,
gloomy; its air one of a shunned and haun-
ted tomb.

But in the back room of the second story
sat two females.

The apartment was a broad *salon*, costily
arranged; the walls draped and tapestried of
Gobelin—rich buff in color, and sparkling
with tiny stars; the ceiling was cased,
cushion-like, with fabric of a similar shade;
and an immense chandelier, depending from
the middle, contained numerous burners that
blazed a fragrant oil.

Ottomans were negligently placed; sin-
gularly devised mattings covered the floor;
stools and rugs were scattered in rich pro-
fusion here and there.

At one side was a raised couch, whose
cushions and curtains matched the sur-
rounding hues and fairly scintillated with
spangles.

On this couch reclined a girl of about
eighteen years

Her complexion was a faint olive, tinged
with a delicate blush; the face chiseled in
purest beauty. Full red lips parted over
teeth to shame the whitest ivory; eyes of jet,
and brilliant as the luster of a diamond. Her
hair reached below the waist—black, silken,
and falling in a mossy cloud; and on her
forehead, held by a band of gold, was a jew-
eled star, that flashed and glittered in the
bright light of the chandelier.

Her habit was of black, spangled with sil-
ver—its low cut exposing a neck, throat and
bust to tempt the passion of a god; and the
dress being looped gradually away from the
right knee, a chaste display of exquisite sym-
metry told of a form that equaled the face in
its enrapturing loveliness.

At her side, kneeling on a stool, was a
hag of sixty-odd years, whose cadaverous
visage told of an ill-spent life and impure
heart.

Her form was long and lank; her head was
covered with matted locks of gray and black;
her jaws were disproportionate; her toothless
gums were visible behind the shriveled lips;
the nose was large, flattened until it spread
upon the bronzed, sunken cheeks. Her
arms were muscular, hairy dangled limply
from the short-cut sleeves of a Gypsy
bodice, or nervously worked about her
pointed knees.

Her snaky eyes were fixed upon the beau-
tiful girl, in whose society she seemed so
strangely out of place.

"Meg," spoke the girl, toying absently
with a ring upon her finger, "how strange
that lives like yours and mine should be so
interwoven—ah! hear the storm."

Her voice was like the warble of a bird,
low and sweet its accent, as she finished,
was tremulous—the tempest shook the room
in which they sat.

"Yes," said the hag, her voice snappish in
its bluntness; "that's a bad night. What a
nice home we've got, though, eh? There's
many a poor, starved soul a-trembling now;
sorry wretches! But I don't pity 'em, I
don't; I was like 'em once myself—but I
worked up. Hey? Why don't they do it,
too? Ha! h—ah! because they can't. They
haven't the brains. No, I don't pity 'em."

Her companion cast a quick, momentary
glance into those devilish orbs; then shud-
dered, as she said.

"And there are better hearts than yours,
Meg Semper, among the poor who suffer on
this night."

"Better hearts? Yes—oh, no doubt!
But where does their timid heart keep
them, eh? Look, in beggary, in filth, in
wretchedness! See me. I'm better off than
they; I struck hard for my ends, I did.
Let them do it, too," and she laughed gut-
turally.

The young girl was not at ease under those
eyes.

"Ay, Meg Semper, you did strike hard—
and wickedly. The blow that placed you
amid the comforts of luxury—you who are
unfit to tread a carpet that has passed
through an honest man's hands!—you who
are vile in heart, thought and deed, as—
as—"

"As he who rules the regions of fire!"
prompted Meg, hissing. "Yes, I am
wicked, Orle Deice—oh, very—but I don't
care. Do you hear? I don't care a straw
how wicked I am!"

Again the lovely girl shuddered; again she
glanced into the eyes of the hag; then she
arose and began pacing the soft mat. Her
right hand sought her bosom, as if to obscurer
what was half unseen; her head bowed in
thought.

"What's the matter now? I haven't made
you angry, Orle, eh? Come, lie down again
—let me look at you. I like to look at you,
I do. Come."

Orle waved her hand.

"Let me alone, Meg; you unnerve me. I
feel that my life is being miserably dragged
out by your presence. If I were coarse and
vile as you, I could endure it. But I am
not; your manner grates upon my spirit."
And she added, half aloud, as she resumed
her walk to and fro: "Why is it fate has cast
my lot with such a woman, chained me to
her for life? We are not fitted for each
other! She is all that bars a human being
from the light and happiness of Heaven! It
is strange—strange."

Meg Semper followed the movements of
the girl with her dagger-like eyes; a hideous
grin settled on her countenance.

"Yes, it's strange, Orle Deice—strange.
But it's so, eh? We've got to stay by each
other forever! That was the oath! Ha! ha!
ha!"

"Don't, Meg, don't! Let me have some
respite from that terrible reminder."

"Now, don't be angry, Orle," pursued the
hag, squeakingly. "I don't want to make
you feel bad—"

"Hark!" interrupted Orle, pausing abrupt-
ly, in the attitude of listening.

The grin disappeared from Meg Sem-
per's face; instead, came a glowering scowl;
the bloodshot eyes burned with a Satanic
glow.

"It's him!" she hissed.

"Yes, it is he," said Orle, in a low voice.

"He is coming."

"Your lover!" and the hiss was prolonged
in a lasting breath.

"Reginald," said Orle, more to herself.

"Curse him!"

The hag started to her feet and took a step
forward.

Orle wheeled about. Her slender figure
was drawn to its full height; she raised one
hand.

"Stop, Meg Semper! Leave me—leave
the room!"

"And leave you alone with him, eh?"
in a tone that was shrill, sneering, protest-
ing.

"Yes, alone with him. Now go."

"But I hate him!"

"No matter what you hate. It is mere
keeping of a frightful oath. And have I not
told you that he is mine? You must not
harm him."

"Every time he comes here you keep me
from him," returned the hag, in a half-fierce
way. "It's no use, I tell you. I hate him!
I'm bound to do 't—my oath!"

"He is mine, Meg Semper"—firmly.
"You shall not harm him. But listen: I
will grant your request to-night; you may
speak with him—"

"Ha!" she exclaimed, with eagerness.

"Provided you will control your hate.
You must offer him no harm. Will you
promise?"

A severe conflict evidently raged within
the dark bosom of the hag. Her breath
came in short jerks.

There was a footfall sounding on the
stairs.

"Your promise?" impatiently.

"I give it!" began Meg, though she articu-
lated the words with difficulty.

"Enough, then; begone. Hurry. He is
here."

Meg Semper hastened to the head of the
couch, and, drawing aside the heavy cur-
tains, disappeared within a concealed open-
ing.

Another second, and there came the sound
of a light knock from the opposite side of the
room.

"Come in," said Orle, in her sweetest
tone.

The curtains were pushed aside, discover-
ing a door, and through this a young man
entered.

Orle had regained her couch, and re-
clined in a graceful posture, her dark eyes,
now liquid and dreamy, bent upon the
comer.

Handsome in limb and feature; eyes dark,
brilliant, flashing; a silken mustache gracing
the upper lip; a high, broad brow, over
which his jetty locks clustered in curls—a
brow that bore the stamp of intellect and
dissipation, at once; clothes of latest fashion;
rings, pins, studs, watch-chain, promi-
nent on his person—such was Reginald
Darnley.

Midway across the room he halted, folded
his arms, gazed upon her, seeming enrapt-
ured with his contemplation; and his cheeks
flushed with a mastering fire.

"Reginald," she said, gently.

Though her voice was winning as a bird-
song, there was something in it which broke
his enchanted reverie. The flush receded
from his face, he drew a long breath and ad-
vanced, saying, simply:

"Well, Orle—I have come."

"Be seated, Reginald; draw an ottoman
to my side. I would have you sit near
me."

He silently obeyed. The lustrous eyes of
the beauty followed him with a yearning
look.

"Reginald, you are cold this evening."

He had forgotten a customary kiss.

"In heart?—yes."

A shadow of pain flitted across her face.

"And why?" biting her under lip till the
warm blood seemed ready to ooze forth.

"Can you ask, Orle?"—fixing a searching
gaze upon her. "Can you not imagine?
You have been my queen, Orle—my fate.
Your love, I know, has won me from many,
very many evil habits that have made up
my life; and my obligation to your soft coun-
sel has only served to thicken a web that
hovers about me. But—but—"

"Well?"

"You have done wrong—"

"Wrong?"

"In teaching me to love you."

Again that shadow of pain upon the lovely
features.

"Reginald!"

"When I first met you," he continued,
"I became your slave—in love. Even now
those bonds are not entirely broken; and they
chafe me, Orle—they chafe me."

"Oh, Reginald, Reginald, what meaning
is in your words? There is something be-
hind them; there is something that makes
me fear."

"Some strange influence has led us to a mutual love—"

"And it has been a happy one!" she exclaimed, quickly.

"To you—perhaps, yes. But to me, Orle, it has now become a misery. Answer me: you knew well enough that, at the time I yielded to your charms and asked you to be my wife—you knew, I say, that I was the affianced of another?"

"Yes," her eyes drooping beneath his steady gaze.

"That first engagement has not been broken off. It never can be."

"Reginald—no—you jest—you cannot mean—"

"I mean it," he interrupted. "I have been, am yet, what the world calls fast and dissipated. What little reform I have undergone, I will admit, Orle, has been of your doing; and I feel grateful. Yet, with all its caprice, there is one recess in my hard heart where honor lurks. That honor calls me to a sense of duty, calls me to my first voluntary allegiance."

"You speak, now, of Cecilia Bernard. Oh, Reginald, forget her; forget that she ever lived. You are mine. No love is greater than that which binds us!"

"No, I cannot forget her, nor that I have wronged her. My conscience pricks me. Pure, loving, trusting girl!—she must never know how deeply I have slighted her affection. I am going to return to her, Orle."

"No—no—no, Reginald; you must not desert me!" she cried, starting up and winding her arms about his neck.

He was upon his feet also, and looked hesitatingly down into the speaking eyes of her who clung to him.

In a moment he said:

"You have heard, Orle; I must bid you farewell. My place is at the side of Cecilia Bernard. My love for you has been a mad infatuation—nothing more—wrought by charms no mortal could resist. You cannot blame me for the step I am about to take, even though it break your heart—you who have lectured me so often upon the rewards of right and punishments of wrong. Be resigned, then."

"I cannot lose you, Reginald; I cannot."

"Consider. I have loved, do love you yet. Do you think I do this now without a pang? My heart aches. But duty, honor, feeling for one who has trusted me, and who learned love's first lessons from my lips, is my incentive. We cannot part. Come! let me kiss you good-by—and let our separation be forever."

Reginald Darnley drew her to him, and would have imprinted that farewell kiss upon her lips.

"Oh, no—no! no!" cried Orle. "You must not say I am to lose you! You are trifling; you would tease me. But it is a cruel tease. Leave off."

"Not a tease, Orle, but stern truth. This is to be our last meeting."

She uttered a quick, pained cry, and clung closer to him.

"Moreover," he added, "my marriage with Cecilia Bernard is to take place at an early day—a date fixed upon long before I saw you."

"Your marriage!—no! you belong to me."

"Calm yourself. What I have said must be."

"Reginald! Reginald! you know not what it is to love. You have taught me to love you, even as I have taught you to love me. We have exchanged vows. In many hours past, when together, the same stream of joy has borne us on its wave—the pulsations of our hearts kept time in responsive beats; our souls were chained together in an ecstasy of bliss! The same joys that delighted your breast have also intoxicated me! My life has been your life, your life has been mine! Without you I could not, would not live! Can you be so cruel, now? Say that you do not mean it. Take back your words. Tell me that you are still mine. Oh! could you but reach my heart! You cannot desert me; I know you will not!"

"Orle, be calm. I foresaw this; but it could not be helped. My dream is past, and you, the bright vision of its center, must

vanish from before me. Again, I say, let me kiss you good-by."

"Reginald, oh! stop—one moment more. You know not what you do. I feel a strange fire lighting in my bosom; it spurs my tongue; I cannot control it! I am not myself. Hear me—I will not part with you! You shall never wed Cecilia Bernard—"

"Orle!"

"Ay, you shall never wed her! She shall not snatch from me the only man I ever did, or ever will love!"

"Stop!"

"Before you shall lead her to the altar, my own hand shall take her life! I would remove her from my path without scruple!"

"Orle, in Heaven's name—"

"Do you hear me, Reginald? Do you comprehend? And I here swear it! Now you know what it is to love! Now you know what one will do to retain that which alone sustains life and happiness! Do not tempt me further," the dimpled arms twining still tighter around his neck, and her lustrous eyes burning strangely. "Do not drive me to madness! I already hate her; do not make me hate you!"

"Orle, stop!"

"No—no, Reginald; you make me say these things. My words are oaths! You are mine! You are learning how a woman loves! May you never know a woman's hate! Cecilia Bernard shall not stand between us! She shall die first! I, Orle Deice, claim you before all women! You are mine! Remember—I will never give you up!"

Her arms suddenly withdrew from his neck.

Her passionate utterances rung in his ear like a threatening knell; he bowed his face in his hands, as if to shut out sight of the lovely being who spoke words in such strange contrast with her nature.

A faint, rustling noise aroused him.

He looked up; then started back aghast. Orle had disappeared.

Before him stood Meg Semper, a hideous shape, whose ghost-like presence, for the moment, terrified him, brought a cold perspiration to his brow.

She stood, with her brawny arms folded, gazing fixedly at him.

The young man was staggered. Had he got into a den of sorcery? Was Orle, after all, but a beautiful fiend who would have charmed him to ruin, and now, in the impulse of hate, had assumed her natural shape of horror?

But, no; that age is past. The horrible thing before him was flesh and blood—a human being of fearful aspect.

"Woman! Hag! Who are you?" sprung from and died huskily on his lips.

"Ha! ha! ha!" she laughed dismally.

"Who am I? I'm Meg Semper! You don't know me, eh? No. You never saw me. But I've seen you; I've seen your father, too. I've kept close to you for the last two years, I have. What for? But, you'll learn soon enough. Take a good look at me. I'm going to be your death!"

She advanced a step, and he recoiled before her.

Her ugly mien, her grating voice, her significant words awed, startled him.

He was now speechless, yet alive to a sense of danger which he read in her leering eyes.

"I say I'm going to be your death!" she screamed. "Do you know what death is? Hey?"

"Woman, keep off! What fiend sent you here? What mean you?"

A rage of hate turmoiled in the shrunken bosom of the hag.

Perhaps she thought of her promise to Orle. But if so, then that promise was burned out by a dire, malignant flame.

She advanced another step. Reginald was transfixed; her eyes, like the orbs of a serpent, held him spellbound, powerless to move.

"I'm bound to take your life! I'm bound to take the life of all named Darnley!—of all who know a favor at the hands of a Darnley! Hear me, eh? You must die!"

"Die! Woman, you are mad! You are possessed of devils! Keep off! God! what are you doing?"

Meg Semper's hands had sought the folds

of her dress. Slowly she drew forth a long glistening knife.

Her eyes blazed like those of a tiger; her other hand worked convulsively, as if she longed to tear him to pieces.

Pale and shuddering, he watched the knife as it ascended, and the hag seemed gathering herself for a spring. His heart was in his throat.

Nearer she came—the dread steel flashing aloft. He would have cried out, but his tongue was paralyzed.

"I say I'm bound to kill you!"—in a shrill whisper. "It's my oath; and I'm going to keep it! This knife is to do it! Hear? Ha! h—a!—the first blood in keeping with my oath—" but the last words froze upon her thin lips.

There was a sharp, reverberating "click" behind Reginald.

Meg Semper took her eyes from her intended victim, to look at the curtains. As she did so, the upraised knife fell from her grasp; her eyes seemed starting from their sockets; her red face actually purpled.

That which she saw was a small, white wrist and hand, and in the hand was what appeared to be a single tongue of golden flame ascending from the center of the palm to the finger-tips—the lapping tongue evidently supporting it in that position.

Only for an instant was the mysterious thing visible—seemingly surrounded by a faint, glimmering halo—and then it was gone.

Simultaneously with its vanishment, the hag uttered a cry that was more like the howl of a beast and sunk forward on the floor.

The spell thus broken, Reginald Darnley paused to bestow one look upon the limp, prostrate form, and then, with a combined feeling of terror and superstition wrestling with his nerves, he rushed from the room, from the house, out into the tempest of wind and rain.

Meg Semper was not insensible through fear or dread at sight of the Flaming Talisman—nor was she insensible at all, except it be for a moment, and this was caused by the overwhelming reaction, the silent significance of the mysterious apparition, which forbade the deed of blood.

So determined, so fixed was she upon the sacrifice of Reginald's life, in keeping with some terrible oath, that the sudden check iced her heated veins; her vision swam in a rage of disappointment; her Satanic heart leaped in chagrin at the failure before her; her limbs gave way, and she fell, helpless.

She did not lie in that position long.

The young man had scarce gone, when she sprung to her feet, and snatching up the knife, clutched its bone handle with an angry grip.

She glared about her, as if seeking for another object in whose flesh to sink the blade.

Orle stood near her, and the hag's eyes fixed upon the girl in a savage, piercing gaze, while she fingered the knife uneasily.

"You did it, Orle Deice; you did it, I say! Fiends alive!—what for? Eh, what for?" advancing and grasping the other rudely.

Orle shivered as the icy fingers closed upon her wrist; but, with a wrench she threw off the hold and said, sternly:

"You forget yourself, Meg Semper! You look as if you would like nothing better than to kill me!"

"And maybe I would—maybe I would!" slowly, and a devilish glitter in her eyes.

"In payment for my having thwarted your intent toward Reginald? But, enough. Put away your weapon. You dare not harm me; you know it—you who hold oaths so sacred."

"Yes, Orle,"—submissively—"I can't harm you. And I won't. You needn't fear of it. I'll stand by my oath; and in doing that,"—the eyes again kindling—"I've got to kill Reginald Darnley!—and after him, Mervin Darnley! Do you hear? I must do it!"

"Beware! I tell you, Meg Semper, he is mine! Remember—the Talisman!"

"Yes, yes!" she screamed. "And that's another! Ha! h—a!—only three left now—only three! It's saved his life twice. Ugh! I feel sick when I see the thing; it makes me mad!—mad!"

"Never mind, we have had enough of this—"

"What now? Your lover's give you the mit. There's a row! What'll you do next?"

Orle was looking down at the matted floor.

"Cecilia Bernard must be taken away from Reginald," she said, musingly.

"Right away!" acquiesced the hag, eagerly. "Yes: take everything away from him!—take his life, too!"

"Where is Nemil?"

"Gone to bed—surly dog! He's tired out running errands."

"This must be done speedily," thinking deeper.

"Without delay!" Meg said, as if to clinch it.

"No more, Meg. We must wait. You may go to bed. Hark!—the bells. It is one o'clock. Do not forget, I want to talk with you and Nemil in the morning."

There were several doors leading from the *salon*, hidden by the rich draperies, and through one of these Meg Semper disappeared, muttering as she went:

"Oho! now—if she only knew! If she only knew the little game I've been playing to-day! If she only knew of the mischief I've done at the house of the Darnleys! But I've sworn to kill him! I'll do't yet! Only three left—and if she don't watch me close, then—he! he! he! Meg Semper knows what she's about. Her lover?—bah! who cares?"

She left the beautiful girl alone and thinking upon a plan to prevent Reginald's marriage with Cecilia Bernard.

"Oh, how I have loved him!" was the warm, passionate utterance that fell from her lips as she walked the room in solitude. "How I have learned to idolize him!—to look upon him as all mine!—all mine! And now he would desert me, would throw me aside, to return to that baby-faced girl! Never!—he shall not do it. Reginald is mine. I have won him—he is mine!"

CHAPTER II.

THE ANGERED FATHER.

"And thus the frowning brow, the reckless form,
And threatening glance, forerun domestic storm."
—CLARE.

"If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."
—SHAKESPEARE.

THE brazen tongues of city clocks were tolling forth the hour of one.

From a window in the second story of a stately residence, situated near a mile from where our story opened, a glimmering light streamed forth to the pavement below.

Within the room an elderly gentleman paced back and forth restlessly.

His mien was commanding, his features stern and rigid; his teeth were locked tightly, and as we mark the darting fire of the gray eyes, half hidden beneath the bristling eyebrows, we can see that he is excited, that he is laboring under the severe tax of pent-up irritability.

Presently he grasped and pulled the bell-cord, with a quick, violent jerk.

"Has he come?" to the bowing servant who soon appeared.

"No, sir."

And, as there was no further question, the man withdrew.

He whom we have introduced was a man of means, position and influence—Mervin Darnley, a retired merchant, and father of Reginald.

He had separated from his wife many years prior to the events about to be related, and the separation was caused by heat of domestic discord.

That parting of man and wife, in a spirit of enmity, has much to do with our narrative.

The family now consisted only of himself and Reginald, besides the numerous household servants.

Something has happened to mar his usual calm exterior. Perhaps it was the per-

fumed billet he held in his hand, reading and rereading it, then crunching and crumpling it, alternately groaning and sighing as he continued his walk from side to side across the apartment.

Half an hour passed. Still he trod the carpet with uneven steps, and the lamp-jet flickered and sputtered as it burned lower.

At the expiration of the time named the servant reappeared, to say:

"He's come, sir."

"Good. I'm glad of it. I'm worn out. You have your orders—be quick, sirrah."

Another period of impatient waiting, and Reginald Darnley entered the presence of his father.

His face was pale, his nerves were unsteady. Fresh from the ordeal of our previous chapter, his mind was not yet balanced in quietness; and the unusual circumstance of Mervin Darnley sitting up, wishing to see him at that late hour, filled him with uncertain conjectures.

"I am at your service, father."

"Be seated, Reginald."

He drew up a chair before his son, and bent those keen gray eyes upon him sharply. He was, for the moment, calm.

"This is rather an unseemly hour to be roaming through the streets of Richmond, Reginald—midnight! I do not like it."

"I was with friends."

"Friends! Who?"

"Oh, old acquaintances—"

"Where are they? Where were you?"

Reginald Darnley hesitated.

A new frown wrinkled the father's brow; he started from his chair, and cried:

"Look, now—you blush to mention the companions with whom you have reveled until midnight. But I know enough. You were with those who, of late, have become your sole associates—and what are they?—the scum and dregs of the foulest who swarm in our midst—the despised, the vulgar, the blasphemous, the shameless!"

The hot blood rushed to the young man's face. He dared not deny this. Prior to visiting Orle Deice, he had passed the evening at the tables of a saloon whose notoriety as a sink of guilt and polished vice was widespread; he had staked and won, staked and lost, at cards, at dice, at monte; and betting with the wildest was his love, or hazarding the closest pleased him most.

As Reginald crimsoned under the realization that his vile habits were known to Darnley, senior, the aged parent continued, growing warmer with his speech:

"Yes, sirrah, you have been at the gaming-table! You have fallen into a circle accursed in the eyes of God and all honest men! What have you to say? I have waited here, for hours, to speak upon the matter, and to shame you! Ay, to shame you!" Then up and down, back and forth, to and fro, went the old gentleman chafing in the subject of his rebuke.

"But, father, near me for a moment. Since you have discovered that which I had hoped to conceal from you, I at least insist—"

"Insist, sir! What do you insist?"

"That you hear my excuses."

"Excuses!"—pausing with an abruptness that said he doubted his ears; "excuses, dev—What would you excuse? You fasten a slur to your character, willfully, headstrong; you carry the name of Darnley among gamblers, cut-throats, and the like—you are one of them yourself; you mar the reputation of one of the oldest families in Richmond—and now you cry excuses? No! There's no weight in excuses; not a bit of it, sir—not a bit of it!"

"You are severe!" said Reginald, calmly, though his face flushed and paled by turns at this tirade.

"Severe? No!—I'm too lenient. Listen: I know more yet. Who is Orle Deice?"

"Orle Deice!" he repeated, quickly, half-arising, for the mention of the name was so unexpected that it startled him.

"Yes. Orle Deice. Ha! I have you. Who is she?"

"She is a pure and beautiful girl," was the prompt, earnest reply.

Darnley, senior, appeared momentarily dumb-struck. Then he cried, sneeringly:

"Pure and beautiful! Oh, yes—very pure and beautiful! But I wish I could believe it. You are affianced to Cecilia Bernard; yet you visit this girl—or, woman, I suppose; you are in love with her; you prove yourself a grand rascal; you—Read that, and then tell me what you think of yourself."

As he handed the young man the crum-

pled, disfigured billet which, up to this time, he held in his hand, squeezing and fingering it as if it were a living thing striving to escape him, he sunk, with a groaning sigh, into the nearest chair, and remained silent, watching his wward son, while the latter perused the delicately-penned and half-obliterated lines:

"MR. MERVIN DARNLEY:—"

"It is with regret that I write to inform you that your son is indebted to me in the sum of one thousand dollars. It is a loan—can be proved, if necessary; but I do not care to expose your son through the action of a lawyer. He does not seem inclined to cancel this obligation, and I am forced to this course by unlooked-for circumstances. Let me hope you will pay the money to the bearer, who can hand you receipt for the same.

"Respectfully,

"ORLE DEICE."

When he had read this, his brain was filled with incredulity.

"Impossible!" he thought; "I cannot believe it! Orle would not do it! When, in the impetus of despair incident to my losses at gaming, I borrowed that money of her, she said she did not wish me to return it. If she does want it, after saying that, why did she not speak of it to me to-night? There is some mystery here."

But he saw that his father was angered, saw that Mervin Darnley was set in the opinion that Orle Deice was not what she should be. He knew that an effort to convince Darnley, senior, of Orle's good character, would be useless, and finally, he easily perceived that protestations of ignorance would not avail.

Still, he ventured:

"How came you by this infamous letter?"

"It was brought me by a negro—an intelligent fellow, but a miserable dog, nevertheless! Now, then, do you marvel that I am aroused? Zounds! What have you to say?"

"Yes, there is a mystery in this!" mused Reginald, inwardly. "A negro? Who could it have been? Who sent him? I cannot, will not believe it was Orle!" then aloud: "Well, and what did you do about it?"

"Paid him. Paid him, and took a receipt—he had it, already written, in his pocket; then I kicked him from the house!" the last with emphasis.

"In that you did wrong."

"Wrong? How wrong? What do you mean by that? Wrong in kicking a scoundrel—"

"No; wrong in paying the money."

"Explain, if you can. Dare you deny your indebtedness to this woman—this—"

"I can and do deny it. I have never met with a woman whose name is Orle Deice."

"What! Then why—how do you know she is 'pure and beautiful'? Answer that."

"Oh, mere rumor," with an attempt at nonchalance. "Therefore, it is impossible that I should have fallen her debtor."

Reginald was playing close, hazardous—fatally.

"In short," he added, after a pause, "the whole affair is a piece of imposition."

Darnley snatched the letter from his son's hand, and glanced at it again, for the hundredth time.

"No!" he exclaimed, vehemently; "the chirography is natural, the wording is business like. To clinch the matter, I saw you, with my own aching eyes, only this night, enter a gaming saloon. The more I think of it, the more I—By Heaven! Reginald, I believe you are both rascal and hypocrite!"

Reginald frowned; but it was lost upon the irate parent.

"That letter is a fabricated lie!" declared the young man, with an effort at self-possession. "If my denial does not outweigh your prejudice, I can say no more."

"You deny all knowledge of this woman?—of this debt?"

"I do."

But Mervin Darnley was too familiar with the page-print of a human face to be so easily deceived. He read the lie that came from his son's lips.

"I have no more to say. You may go," brief, blunt, positive, significant.

Reginald, without another word, quitted the room, glad to escape the embarrassment that was fast coming upon him.

Mervin Darnley jerked the bell-rope for perhaps the sixth time within two hours and resumed his striding.

"Tell Reginald Darnley's valet that I wish to speak to him," was the order.

The valet came.

Of medium height, strangely resembling Reginald in the outline of his features, though he was beardless; on one cheek an ugly scar very near three inches long; oily in voice, polite in manner, bending low before the manufacturer—this was Herwin Reese, valet to young Darnley.

"Sir, you sent for me," bowing and pausing near the center of the apartment.

"Yes. Are you not with Reginald almost constantly?"

"Unfortunately, yes," was the hesitating reply.

"Ha! Unfortunately? Now I have it! Why unfortunately?"

"For many reasons. First"—he stopped short and glanced uneasily at the door.

Darnley was in no mood to waste time.

"There's no one there. Go on—quick!"

"I fear I am not at liberty to expose Mr. Darnley's affairs," demurred the valet.

"Liberty, the devil! I am his father; I have a right to know. Now, out with it—why unfortunately?"

"First, because I have witnessed habits of carelessness and vice."

Darnley groaned.

"Answer me this: does he know a woman named Orle Deice?"

Herwin Reese bowed again and replied:

"Yes."

The valet's eyes glittered singularly as they bent upon the carpet. Evidently, this catechising afforded him a secret pleasure.

"Is he intimate with her?"

"Oh, very! I have accompanied him often on his visits to the girl, whom, I know, he loves deeply."

Darnley buried his face in his hands and groaned again. Then, looking up:

"And do you know whether he owed her any money?"

"A thousand dollars."

The answer was prompt.

"Oh, God!" wailed the old gentleman, as all was herein substantiated, his son proven a liar, his whirling senses sent half-frantic—for it cut deep, deep to his heart.

"That will do. Go—leave me," he said at last, in a broken voice.

Herwin Reese, as he departed, was secretly jubilant. He had, with affected unwillingness, added fuel to the flame of quarrel between father and son.

As he turned his back upon Darnley, the subtle gleam of his eyes betrayed a brimming exultation; the smooth lips curled in a sardonic smile.

"Ah!" he thought; "all works well. Our plot starts finely, Meg Semper. Now, if it will only go on!—how much better to destroy him in this way. This is not an end of the quarrel. I'll wager, upon what I know of Mervin Darnley's temper, that Reginald's prospects are dark! Another day will show!—another day! This scar upon my cheek still burns and smarts, Reginald Darnley! I have not forgotten, in a short year, how to hate! Meg Semper would keep her oath! But how much better to follow out my plan! Ha! h-a!"—an inward chuckle—"your doom is closing in fast!"

The entry lamps had been extinguished; a thick darkness prevailed, and as the valet emerged from the room, he shivered involuntarily.

Whether he imagined a lurking presence ready to seize upon his flesh, or a hiding specter about to glide out from one of the numerous by-passages or branching stairways, to dog his footsteps—which, we do not venture; but, from some cause, he felt anxious to reach a place where there was light.

Not a dozen steps were taken, when he came in contact with something which brought him to a sudden, jarring halt. He raised his hand; it touched a human face.

Herwin Reese was no coward, but he recoiled from this unpleasant encounter.

A hand clutched his collar; a voice said:

"Come!"

Reese was bewildered; and, in this bewilderment, he was pulled, jerked, hurried along the dark entry at a breakneck rate.

When they reached the main hall, he uttered an exclamation that contained more than astonishment.

"Why, Master Reginald, what can you—can this—"

"Silence, wretch!" still urging the other onward.

"But what have I—"

"Silence, I say!"

Passing the portly servant, who dozed unconsciously in his large arm-chair, Reginald Darnley continued out to the balustraded steps, and there released the valet.

"Master Reginald—" began Reese, for the third time; but he was again interrupted.

"Wretch! Villain! Scoundrel!" cried the young man, in a rage. "So you've betrayed me, have you? You've turned informer?"

"Sir—Master Reginald—no, I—"

"Liar! I heard you. You substantiated all my father's suspicions!—miserable dog!"

"Ay, Master Reginald, I am a dog," but his eyes kindled as he bowed in mock humility.

"I heard all—I stood outside the door. Rascal!"

"Call me rascal, too, if you will; you have done it before."

"And if I had a knife, I'd lay open your other cheek!" pursued Reginald, boiling with passion. "I'd give you another scar like that you received at my hands a year ago!"

Herwin Reese was silent; but his breast was firing, his breathing was hard.

"You are dismissed. I'll have you no longer near me. I owe you a small balance—come to-morrow and get it, and take away your wardrobe at the same time. Now go, before I kick you from the steps!"

"Kick me—"

"Yes, scoundrel!—kick you!" and he dealt the valet a fierce blow, accompanied by a kick.

Herwin Reese spun round like a top; then tripped and rolled down to the pavement, where he lay half-stunned.

When he recovered his senses the front door was closed—silence reigned about him.

"So!" he broke forth, grinding his teeth till they seemed ready to snap; "you'll kick me? I am dismissed? So be it. I don't care much. I'll triumph yet. There are other ways to strike at you, since I am no longer in your employ. I will have my revenge for this knife-cut on the cheek—and it shall be sweet—sweet! Adieu, Darnleys, both; father and son, you are doomed! Meg Semper lives to keep her pledge to the creole beauty! Doomed are you; and Herwin Reese can aid! Ha! h-a! beware!"

He shook his fist at the gloomy building, his eyes dancing like the embers of a hearth.

Then he turned away.

Striding rapidly along for several squares, he at last entered a broad alley, or court; from this, he turned into another alley, running at angles, narrower, much darker.

Through the unlighted avenue, through a sickly atmosphere, his bare head wet and cold in the storm that now was lulling gradually—on went Herwin Reese. Presently he halted before the back basement entrance to a large edifice—the house in which lived Orle Deice.

Advancing to the door, he gave a peculiar knock.

In a moment he heard the shuffling of feet; in another moment the bolts were drawn, and the cracked, harsh, snapping voice of Meg Semper cried:

"Well, now, who's this? What's the matter at this hour of the night, when I'm just going to bed, eh? It's you, Herwin Reese?"

"Yes, it's me," answered the valet. "It's Herwin Reese, drenched, soaking wet, and in a rage! Let me get in here, and ask your questions afterward."

CHAPTER III.

THE UGLY CONFERENCE.

A—more of mystery—

The solemn hour

Of morning's night

Saw foes convened in power;

To plot the blow of rival's hateful guile—

To rob a lover of a lover's smile.

—A. P. M., JR.

As Herwin Reese spoke, the hag's manner altered, somewhat, to a blunt welcome.

He brushed past her, and, without waiting until she had closed the door, continued on to a room beyond, where he threw himself into a chair.

The apartment wore an aspect of comfort and luxury combined, with every conceivable appurtenance to the furniture of a thoroughly arranged bedchamber.

It was the sleeping-room of Meg Semper.

When she had rebolted, relocked and barred the door, she joined him.

"Ha!" she cried, striding up to him, and bending down to peer closely into his face; "what brings you here now? Do you know it's long after midnight? You're gloomy, too. You won't speak. Tell me what's wrong? Hey?" and her voice, at first loud, harsh, chattering, settled to a low hiss of inquiry.

"What's the matter, I say? And you came in bareheaded! Devils! speak out."

"I am driven to madness!" suddenly cried the valet, with such vehemence that Meg Semper started back from her stooping posture.

"Heigho!"—distending her eyes, and throwing her brows into the shape of an inverted triangle—"you're mad, eh? So—you look like it. Now, what are you mad about?"

Reese began pacing the room.

"Everything!" he muttered, between his grinding teeth.

"Oho! 'everything' is a good deal. Now, sit down. What is it?"

He resumed his seat, and said, more calmly:

"Nemil delivered the letter to-day—"

"He did! He did! Yes—and I've got the money."

"Father and son have had a quarrel, in consequence—"

"Good! Ha! h—a! That's what we want."

"Mervin Darnley, it seems, has learned much of his son's recent habits, and the letter was as a lighted match to the magazine. I was called in to-night to give testimony."

"That's good, too! Well?"

"Of course I told all I knew."

His eyes glittered venomously, and Meg Semper chuckled lowly.

"But," he added, "the culmination of the affair is, I've been discharged."

"Eh? That's bad," she commented, frowning.

"More—I was kicked from the house."

"What!" yelled Meg Semper, the frown upon her wrinkled forehead deepening to a scowl.

"Ay, with a kick and a blow I was knocked from the steps to the middle of the street. O—h! curses! curses!" and his hands clinched till the nails sunk in the flesh.

"Who did it? Who did it?" hissed, cried, snarled the hag, her eyes snapping fiercely, and her features distorting with excitement.

"Reginald Darnley—curse him!"

"Reginald Darnley!" she fairly howled; "and he did it?—he kicked you? By Satan!—and I had him at my knife-point only this night!"

"What do you mean?"

"He was here—came to see Orle. I would have killed him then; but the Talisman saved his life, as it has done twice before. I'm mad with thinking of the 'curst thing.'"

"Orle used it?"

"Yes. Who else? But there's only three left now—only three! When they're gone, too, nothing can prevent me keeping my oath! And I'll keep it sooner, unless she watches me close!—I will."

"I think it's better to follow my plan, Meg," he said, studiously.

"But it may take too long—that's all. Devils a-loose! my oath was to kill him. If you want to do it your way, then keep him out of my sight. I can't think of anything but killing him, when I see him!"

Her mouth twitched nervously, her eyes were ablaze with a demon look.

"Don't work yourself into a frenzy."

"I can't help it. I'll have his life—I will!—it's my oath—"

"Not if I can prevent it!" interrupted a voice.

Orle Deice stood in the doorway.

"Thought you'd gone to bed!" screamed the hag in surprise.

"I heard a knock," said Orle, advancing, "and was curious to know who it could be. Besides, you are talking in a voice to rouse the dead. It is fortunate that this house stands alone, and again fortunate that the walls are thick—or you would have some one searching out the cause of such disturbance. What brings you here, Herwin Reese?"

"Orle—"

His eyes were fixed upon her in a passionate gaze; his mien softened.

"Tell me what brings you here?" she repeated, as he hesitated while studying her charms.

"I am discharged."

"Discharged?"

"Yes, Orle; and have been kicked from the house of the Darnleys."

"Kicked! What for?"

"Because—"

A quick, warning glance from Meg Semper checked him, and the hag spoke.

"Yes, Orle Deice, Herwin had to tell of your lover's bad habits—that's all. And Reginald has kicked him out for 't."

Here she burst into a loud, sepulchral laugh, but added, immediately:

"And, Herwin, her lover, 's give her the mit! He's left her! Ha! h—a! There's a row now. She hates him some, I guess. What are you going to do, Orle Deice—"

"No, Meg Semper, I do not hate him. I still love him. He is still mine. But, stop this. You ask me what I shall do. It is partly that question which brings me here. You say Nemil is in bed?"

"Nemil? Yes—obstinate tiger! he wouldn't stop to take his wine, he was so tired when he came in."

"Wake him up."

"Ho! Wake him up? But you'll have him mad!"

"No matter. I must see him at once, while my bosom is warm with hate for this girl—Cecilia Bernard!"

"Well, if you want him—now, devils alive! what can you want him for?"

"To assist in striking a blow at Reginald Darnley," answered the beauty, using this as an impetus to the hag's movements.

It was sufficient. Meg Semper hurried from the room.

"Orle."

Herwin Reese uttered the word in his gentlest tone when they were alone.

"Well?" tossing her head with a half-imperious gesture and flashing an impatient look upon him from those deep, dark eyes.

For a few seconds he gazed at her in silence.

"Orle, why do you love Reginald Darnley so?" he asked.

"Why do I love him? That's a strange question, Herwin Reese."

"Yet it is natural. You once loved me."

An expression, part scorn, part contempt, dwelt for a moment in her beautiful face.

"True, I did," with a slight shudder; but she added, without pause: "I did not know your miserable nature then. When a woman loves, she seeks for golden attributes in the object of her affection. You have none."

"And is Reginald Darnley perfect?"

"Far from it; but the veins of gold in his character are numerous as the dross in yours—and the latter is great."

He winced under this.

"And has all your love for me died out?"

"All," emphatically.

"Orle Deice, why permit this change? You once said you were mine. We have been long together—long trod life's path as brother and sister. I love you more now than ever before; and in this moment, when

the man you have given your whole heart to deserts you—basely proves himself unworthy even of your friendship—I am ready to kneel and plead again for a love I should never have lost. Will you not let me win you back?"

He arose and took a step toward her.

She waved him back.

"Don't come near me, Herwin Reese! Say no more of this. Even toleration is weak within me. A hypocrite is the meanest of men—even meaner than the thief who would boldly rob a church altar, and afterward join the congregation in prayers. You are a hypocrite. I know you hate Reginald Darnley; yet you have, for over a year, held the position of his valet, bowing before him and executing his wishes as a very slave. What for?—to glut a vengeance; a vengeance Satanic, because you fear to strike him like a man; and like an assassin who lurks within a gloomy forest, to waylay the unconscious traveler, so do you wait to vent, from concealment, the venom of your hate! Say no more to me of love, or—I shall despise you! Hush!—here they come."

Meg Semper returned at that juncture, accompanied by the party called Nemil.

He was an African of towering build, bristling, bearded front, scowling, hang-dog visage, and muscular frame. His face was black as lamp-smoke, and of yengeful expression; his eyes were bloodshot and of brutal glance; his voice was of a guttural baritone.

In no very good humor at being aroused from a sound sleep, he preceded Meg, with long strides, and glared at the two who seemed awaiting his coming.

"Well," he snarled, "what do you wake me up at this time for?"

"A matter of business, Namil," returned Orle, authoritatively.

But her tone was far from quieting, for he exclaimed, with a savage growl and a grunt:

"Business be cursed! I'm tired. Can't keep on my feet for all time—nor can anybody else! D'you know that?"

"Tush, Nemil! you're an ass!" cried Meg. "Talk better to Orle."

"But," spoke the valet, who—though he had not the remotest idea what Orle wanted of the African, yet, despite her recent treatment of him, was eager to sustain her—sought to soothe him, "we thought you were fond of money."

"Ha! money!" quickly ejaculated the negro, while his eyes shone greedily.

Meg Semper, with a grin, placed her forefinger against her nose.

"Yes, Nemil; of course, where there's business, there's money," glancing at Orle.

"I have a piece of work for you to perform, Nemil," Orle said; "a plan in which you must assist. If you are ready, it will pay you. If you are not ready—then go back to bed."

But the mention of money had thoroughly awakened Nemil; he was now of a pliant mind.

"That's another matter," he grunted, with satisfaction. "If there's money, I'm ready enough. Now, what is it?"

"Yes, what is it?" put in Meg, shrilly. "I want to hear the plan to rob Reginald Darnley of his intended bride. Out, now!"

"You shall hear it. It is simple," returned the girl, her ripe lips compressed and dark eyes flashing with thought of a rival whom she was about to crush.

They grouped around her to discuss the plot by which the marriage between Reginald Darnley and Cecilia Bernard was to be prevented; and the tableau was a weird one.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS CARD-PLAYER.

"Alas! I have no hope nor health,
Nor peace within, nor calm around."

—SHELLEY.

REGINALD DARNLEY, after having discharged his valet, strode hurriedly past the hall servant—who had caught just sufficient of the angry dialogue to make him wonder and gape—and, seeking his rooms, he cast himself mechanically into the nearest chair, where he sat silently gazing down at the carpet.

His father knew all—knew that he was a gambler, a card-player, mingling with the

herding wretches who comprise the flashy, dare-devil portion of a community—only one grade above the common "rough," and with no aim, no ambition, beyond the excitement of "Tiger."

The note purporting to have come from Orle Deice had fed the flame of irritation; though he could not believe the beautiful girl, who professed such love for him, would thus create so dangerous a discord.

The affair was one of mystery to him.

His handsome face flushed, paled, then flushed again, as he meditated upon the probable consequences pending. What action would his father take? He was too stern, too sensitive in the family honor, to calmly brook the casting of a stain upon it.

Then the young man's cheek whitened as he thought of another thing: what if Mervin Darnley should disown him? If such happened, what had the future in store?—poverty, degradation; for Reginald's winnings at the baize table were equilibrated by his losses, and, therefore, a meager, if any, resource lay in this.

Though educated for society, he was without a trade. Would his friends aid him? Were there those among his "Bohemian" acquaintances—his card-tricking, dice-bantering, "sharp"-playing associates—who would lend him a helping hand?

Thus ruminating, he fell asleep.

He did not awake from his sound though restless slumber until nine o'clock next morning, and would have slept much later had there not been a loud rap at his door.

A servant presented a note.

Trembling with agitation, he read the epistle. As he perused the lines, all color fled from his cheeks, he staggered and clutched the mantelpiece for support, his knees grew weak and his brain dizzy.

His worst fears were realized. The note ran thus:

"REGINALD DARNLEY:—"

"Not content with sully the name of Darnley by your infamous course, you have proven yourself an unprincipled liar! It is my duty to maintain the honor and dignity of our house, at every sacrifice. Therefore, understand: I no longer consider you son of mine, and bid you, now and forever, quit my presence! Go—go to those whose vile surroundings you preferred to the home I have striven to make pleasant for you; go, where a Darnley never went before! And this is the ending of a parent's fondest hopes—hopes of seeing you an upright man, honored among men—a mere shadow. My heart bleeds!—but the justice of my course will heal it. Do not seek an interview; I would be spared its pain, and shall not waver in my purpose."

"MERVIN DARNLEY."

And by this act did the manufacturer seek to cleanse the sullied page.

"Disowned! Disowned!" groaned Reginald, hoarsely. "God! what am I to do?"

An hour after learning of his home-exile, the young man was seated in a quiet restaurant, at breakfast.

He had immediately left the house, collecting what ready money he could count, and, with a desperate spirit, braced himself to face the world, alone, without that shelter which had opened to him always, from birth to manhood.

As he sipped the warm coffee, his fine dark eyes seemed to have lost much of their wonted brilliancy; his face was pale, dejected, in expression.

After securing rooms, he walked out to the busy street, and turned—he cared not whither.

The noisy hum of business on every side did not arouse him from his meditations, as, with head hung, he pursued an indefinite course.

Unknowingly, he wandered from the liveliest sections—presently he became aware that he was followed.

Glancing back, he saw an aged woman approaching, with a basket on her arm. Something in her appearance struck him. He halted. In a few seconds she came up.

"Ha! h—a! Reginald Darnley, we've met again, eh?"

There was no mistaking that voice; it was the fiend-visaged hag, Meg Semper.

She dropped the basket; her hand sought

the murderous knife that was secreted in the folds of her dress.

Shuddering, he glanced quickly about him; not a soul in sight. He was almost in the suburbs of the city. The thoroughfare was lonely, deserted; and on the ominous stillness arose the hum of the distant market.

"I told you I was going to be your death!" cried the hag, advancing upon him.

How strange the fascination of those basilisk eyes! They held him riveted in a horrible magnetism.

"Ha! h---a, you're doomed. Prepare! My oath!--my oath!"

Thrills of ineffable horror, quick and startling to the nerves, flashed through his system; his mouth twitched, his hands worked convulsively, great beads of sweat started out upon his brow; alarming chills shot through his veins; his eyes were fixed staringly on the creature who menaced him, while all strength froze upon his muscles—left him powerless, dismayed.

Was it to be a murder, in broad daylight, upon the public street?

"Doomed, Reginald Darnley!--doomed." another step; the shining knife glistened in her hand.

Suddenly there was the rustle of a dress, the wind of a swiftly passing figure, something quivered for an instant before the hag's eyes—a small white hand and wrist, with the single tongue of flame—the Talisman!

Meg Semper uttered a half-smothered howl of rage, and wheeled around in time to see the figure of a woman, with long, dark hair floating in waves about her shoulders as she sped away.

Reginald was released from the horrible charm, and, with an indescribable feeling of dread, he turned and fled from the spot.

Meg Semper gazed after the female figure, and if she had had teeth, they would have been pulverized in the fierce working of the mouth, as she muttered:

"By Satan! I thought the girl was safe at home. How'd she get on my heels so quick, eh? She said last night she'd prevent my doing it, if she could. She watches me close. Only for the 'curst Talisman I'd had his life. And I will have his life—if he's in the house, or on the street, or anywhere. It's my oath! But now there's only two left. Ha! h---a! only two more! And when they're gone, then—ha! ha! ha! he must die, anyhow! Nothing can save him."

And with this, she recovered her basket and moved away.

This occurrence, this miraculous escape from a death that seemed inevitable, increased the fog of mystery which hazed and perplexed the young man's mind.

Why was the hag so persistent in her resolve to take his life? He had never done her injury—never saw her until the night previous. Ay, and through what intervention had he been preserved on these two occasions, when the fiend, with murder in her eyes and a deadly blade in her hand, was so near accomplishing her dire purpose?

Thus trained the thoughts and questions in his mind as he slackened his gait to a slow, meditative walk.

On neither occasion had he seen the Talisman; so oblivious had his senses been to all save the shuddering realization of a pending doom and sight of the hideous being who would mete out that doom.

"Hello, Rex! How d'you do?"

Reginald looked up. He stood before the identical gambling-saloon in which he had spent several hours the night before.

Two acquaintances stood near the steps; one of these had saluted him.

He hesitated. Then, fired by a reckless resolve, he hurried past the two men, merely nodding, and entered the establishment.

The general saloon was closed—being only thrown open to votaries of the "Egyptian King" at night—but to a partially private room he continued on, and soon stood amid a blaze of light reflected from prism-hung chandeliers, for the room was kept darkened to screen the interior from prying eyes on the opposite side of the street.

Seated at a large table in the center of the saloon were a few flashily-attired "bloods," who simultaneously greeted him.

"Who is playing?" asked Reginald, bluntly.

"Cards?" interrogated the superintendent.

"Yes, cards."

And he added, to the others:

"Who plays? Come, gentlemen, I have money to lose, or, perhaps, luck to win."

"Who will play?—some one?" urged the superintendent.

His challenge met no answer. No one there cared to venture a game with him; he was too well known as an adept.

Reginald tossed down the pack of cards that had been handed him, and withdrew to one of the curtained alcoves that lined the side of the room.

He had scarce sought this retirement, when the door again opened and a stranger appeared.

An old man of about sixty, with a frosty mustache, that drooped in twirls, and heavy whiskers of a like color; of sallow complexion, and wearing green spectacles. His garments were tight pants, buckle-gaiters, loose vest, gray frock coat with tight-fitting sleeves, that gave his arms a very thin appearance. His hat was a very large, broad-brimmed, black slouch, which, as he held it in his hand, and seemed to bend with the weight of years, touched his ankles.

"Day, gentlemen," said this personage.

"Are you playing?"

"Hey, old mustachios!" bawled a young sprig, whose brain was tipsy in the contents of his stomach; "I say (hic!) you ain't goin' to play?"

For which the superintendent tapped him on the shoulder, and said:

"Hold your tongue, or I'll kick you downstairs!"

Then he addressed the new-comer:

"How will you play, sir? You are a stranger here, I see."

"Yes," in a peculiar, bland voice, "a stranger, but my 'papers' are not fresh. Two at cards, if you please."

"Yes, sir. Who plays? Two at cards. Will any play?"

The curtains of the nearest alcove were thrust aside, and Reginald Darnley answered:

"I play!"

The old man's eyes gleamed strangely behind the spectacles as Reginald presented himself.

Both parties were soon seated at the game. "Wine!" called the young man after gathering in the first stakes.

An eager group intently watched the players.

Reginald's aptness to trick an opponent was well known. The young man's antagonist was a stranger. Would the latter soon see with whom he had to deal, and back out?

They smiled as Reginald swept in his first winnings; they smiled again when the second stake followed the first.

They played for five dollars. Soon this was raised to ten; then to twenty.

"Do that again, sir, and I'll throw up my hand," remarked the old man, in his low, mild voice.

Reginald bit his lip. He had been detected in a favorite piece of cheater.

"Ah, young man, you play exceedingly well. You have won two hundred dollars from me. But I am not discouraged. Shall we double?"

"Triple, if you like!" was the warm answer.

The wine and the game gradually consumed Reginald in excitement.

The old man was cool and calm as an autumn breeze, with its slight crispness and easy vibration.

The lookers-on increased. Finally, there was no other game in progress in the room.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SNARE.

"Well, I will know the worst and leave the wind

To drift or drown the venture on the wave."

"Oh, what a weight is in these shades!"

—WORDSWORTH.

It was the morn of the day succeeding the night of storm.

In the suburbs of the city, nestling in a vernal grove that echoed with the carol of birdling vocalists, was a cottage, whose Gothic windows peeped from beneath a purple screen of wisteria.

Surrounding the house was an extensive garden, whose varied hues of bloom were glistening in the crystal damp of the recent rain.

It was the residence of Lacy Bernard, a retired merchant, who sought the fairy retreat to pass his wintering years in quiescence, with a fond wife and beautiful child. This child was Cecilia—a blonde of houri-like form, hair of shimmering gold, face to vie the beauty of the bright, "proverbial rose," and deep blue eyes that danced like the ripple of a lake beneath a silver moon.

At the moment, Cecilia was walking in the miniature Eden of her home, arm in arm with a tall, handsome young man, whose complexion and manner at once betrayed that he was a Northerner.

Their conversation was of the flowers—what language more beautiful?—and his many gallant speeches seemed of more than passing import, for, anon, the cheeks of his fair companion crimsoned at his words, like timid clouds that hover near the half-open portals of Aurora.

"Miss Bernard, you must feel ineffably happy in your lovely surroundings."

"Perhaps," she returned, absently. "You know one's inward self is not always happy, no matter what the surroundings."

"Then you are not happy?"

"Why do you ask? You have changed the subject of our conversation rather abruptly."

"Your words imply that there is a something within you not to be rested by the gorgeous picture that here abounds. There is a cloud; you cannot deny it. Would I had the power to dispel that cloud."

Looking up into his face, she detected him in a fixed, ardent gaze upon the golden tresses at his shoulder. Quickly averting her eyes, she said:

"You draw too abrupt an inference."

The evasive words were lost upon him.

"Your hand trembles on my arm—Cecilia."

"Trembles—"

"Yes. I am satisfied now. Come—I have fixed my resolve; listen—"

"Let us return to the house, Mr. Waldron."

"And disappoint the birds that sing now, for your special pleasure? How ungenerous that would be! Here is a seat. Sit down; I beg."

She yielded to his request, though seeming anxious to avoid what was pending. She knew what was eager to escape his lips, knew that he would whisper words of love and devotion; the quick perception of a cultivated mind had discovered this.

"Miss Bernard—Cecilia," he said, presently, "it's now over six months since I became a visitor at your father's house. During that time, I have learned to love you. It is of that love I would speak."

"Your love, Mr. Waldron?" with a slight start, and voice not so even as it might have been.

"Yes," he interrupted, fervently. "Now, will you not let me plead this love? My every hope is centered—"

"Hush!" her voice low, and manner that of one ill at ease—"do not speak of this, Mr. Waldron—do not."

"Nay, listen, while I tell you how dear you are to me; while I tell you what life will be to me without you—"

"No, no, no; cease. I cannot—I have no right to listen!"

Their gaze was one; their eyes volumed that sweet, subtle power which links hearts in a bond of mutual affection.

But there was an unrest in her glance; something marred the pleasure of her thoughts.

Then, yielding to the warmth that swelled each fiber of her system, she pillowed her head upon his breast.

"Let me know my fate, darling. But why should I ask?—I see you are already mine—speak; am I right?"

"I—I do love—oh! no, no; what am I saying? I must not love you."

"Must not! In Heaven's name!—have I asked too late for that which I so fondly hoped to call my own? Unsay those words, Cecilia."

"No—no; I must not love—and yet—"

"Ah, y t?"

"I do love you, for my heart will have it so!"

Her words were quick, short-breathed; the luster of her eyes was dimmed; there was a sob in her voice, which only a painful effort could restrain.

In a passionate impulse, he drew her unresisting form closer to him, and felt the fair frame quiver in his embrace.

Quickly, however, she disengaged herself, as if ashamed of the part she had acted, and started to her feet.

"I forgot myself!" she exclaimed, in confusion. "Let us retire to the house at once."

"No, not forgotten yourself, but told me that I have won your heart. I am not fully answered yet. Your hand now, Cecilia—will you give it, also?"

"Do not press this subject, Mr. Waldron. Come; please return to the house."

"Will you not give me a definite answer?" he persisted, mildly.

"You are cruel. I have begged you to desist."

As they retraced their steps along the gravel path, he asked:

"Why do you evade me in this, Cecilia?"

"Because it is my duty."

"Duty? Why, if your heart is given, do you refuse the answer which I believe is justly due? Will you tell me this?"

"No." The reply was low, but firm.

"Will you not confide in me? Tell me why, how you love, and will not plight a lover's troth."

"I have nothing to confide, Mr. Waldron."

"But you love me?"

"Yes," was the soft, impulsive answer, and the weight on his arm grew heavier.

A thrill of joy passed over him; but it was doomed to an abrupt dispellment, for she added:

"It must end there. I am wrong in admitting it, and you must forget it. I can never be your wife."

For a second he was dumb.

"Love me as you do!" he exclaimed; "and cannot, will not be my wife? In the name of Heaven!—what mystery is this?"

"Mr. Waldron—cease—show mercy. Do not rend my heart by continuing this conversation."

"But, tell me what you mean. Will you not give me a hope?"

"I cannot! I cannot!"

He was silent. How strange it seemed to him, that he could possess the fair girl's love, hear her, in unmistakable syllables, declare a reciprocation of his affection, yet hear of an impediment to their marriage.

What mysterious power limited the heart and action to attest a love, while it compelled the lips to utter impossibility of holy union.

When they reached the steps leading to the vine-clad porch, she would have retained his arm; but he halted.

"Cecilia, I must bid you good-day."

"So soon?"—quickly, and surprised.

"I have already stayed too long. Pleasant dreams by day and night, until we meet again," though his voice was broken, disappointed.

She must have seen how keen his disappointment; she must have felt anxious, for she detained him, to say, while she looked yearningly up into his face:

"Harry, we part friends, do we not? You will come again—soon? Oh! if you did but know how terrible it is for me to learn your love, to return that love, yet be unable to bestow my hand!—you are not angry?"

"I cannot so far forget that I am a gentleman, Cecilia."

An emotion worked within his breast as he listened to her words—so full of love and yet so wounding. His lips moved, as if to plead anew the cause which seemed hopeless; he would have clasped her to him. But, with a mighty effort, he refrained.

Another parting word, a bow that was distant, even icy, and he departed.

A few steps, and he looked back. She stood where he had left her, her face buried in her hands, and a low sobbing reached his ears.

Should he return? Irresolute, he paused; the next instant he passed on, out at the rose-twined gate.

Cecilia stood, for a long time, solitary and weeping.

From the interchange of loving words, the soft sigh, the fond caress, the magnet touch of lip to lip—from these we know that her heart was given to Henry Waldron. Given wholly? Wait.

When the tear-dimmed eyes had partially regained their former luster, and the heaving bosom was schooled to cease its throbbing, she glanced toward the gate, half-expecting to see him lingering there, waiting for a sign, a murmured "come," that would recall him. But he was gone.

Slowly, sadly she turned from the spot and entered the house.

Alone in the privacy of her room, the anguish of a fettered spirit asserted itself.

She advanced to a small casket on a table near her bedside, and drew forth two daguerreotypes. As she gazed upon them, her sobbing grew more violent.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, "tell me my own heart. Tell me—tell me, which of these do I love best?" They fell from her hand, and, sinking back upon her bed, she buried her face in the downy pillow, as if to shut from her vision that which caused her misery.

The two pictures were Henry Waldron and Reginald Darnley—the latter her affianced; though she knew not the true character of the man to whom her hand was pledged.

Her heart leaned equally toward each—she loved both Waldron and Darnley in that depth of Heaven-wrought passion alone consonant with the fervor of a pure, guileless woman. And this her misery: knowing that she loved one as the other—perhaps Darnley a little less than when she had given him a lover's promise.

At the dinner-hour, Lacy Bernard and his wife missed the sunny presence of their child.

A servant was dispatched up-stairs, who returned with the information that Cecilia felt unwell.

Mrs. Bernard sought her daughter. She saw that the rosy tinge was gone from her cheeks, knew she was not well.

Cecilia would not speak her secret.

A mother's caresses were not sufficient medicine for a torn and aching heart, such as hers; it was a yearning for—she could not say what—perhaps a liberation from her vows to Reginald Darnley? And how could even that benefit her? The choice would be to be made again.

She knew their love was great, she knew she loved both in the same throbbing of her heart. Even the sweet commune of prayer served but to increase her knowledge of the wrong spirit which ruled her, despite her efforts to decide and be at rest.

The gentle whisper of her mother's voice seemed a mockery; the birds that caroled in the foliage near the house seemed to sing the louder, as if rejoiced at her unhappiness; not a perfumed breeze ruffled the curtains at her window but what contained a murmur of derision.

The day wore on.

A new choir joined in the melody that had enlivened the golden day; enchanting vespers arose from the green depths of the garden bower without, as evening gradually drew its mantle on the skies.

Alone, lying there upon her bed, half-asleep, yet awake to the surrounding changes and the cadent air of approaching night, Cecilia remained.

Beyond a far woodland, rich with the verdurous canopies of summer growth, the sun shimmered its parting rays upon the cottage home, when Cecilia aroused from her wakeful dreams.

Her features were calmer; but a glance at her mirror told how marked were the effects of that day's agony.

Mechanically she arranged her toilet; the tea-bell was tinkling in the lower hall.

There was a rap at her door. A note was handed her. Tearing open the envelope, she read:

"DEAR CECILIA:—

"Unlooked-for circumstances have arisen, which compel me to leave town at once. I am so busied, I have not time to call upon you. But I would see you before I go. If you can—come. Follow the bearer of this

note, who will conduct you to me. I am not at home.

REGINALD."

This was strange! How unlike Reginald's way of wording a note did this one seem; but the handwriting was certainly his. Then she read it again.

"I must go. I must see him," she murmured, after a spell of thought; and addressing the servant: "Tell the bearer of the note I will come directly."

Love is strong. Despite the singularity of the request, and the fact of its being worded so unlike those she had received from him, often, there was a charm in the name of the man she loved, which prompted her to grant the writer's wish.

Hastily throwing a shawl over her shoulders, and snatching up her hat, she descended to the hall.

The man she saw was Nemil.

He was well-dressed; deputed himself with all the politeness of his rough, wild nature.

"Did you bring the note?" she asked, the African's visage causing her a feeling of distrust.

"Yes," he answered, briefly. "Reginald Darnley sent me. Go?"

She hesitated.

"Go?" repeated Nemil.

"Yes; lead on. Is it far?"

"Not far."

Mr. and Mrs. Bernard were at tea, and, unnoticed, the two left the house.

Twilight was deepening; already dark shadows were settling in the streets.

She scanned her conductor's face. Perhaps its fierce mold forced suspicions in her mind. Why should Reginald employ such a person, when there were familiar servants at his house? But the note said he was not at home—she had momentarily forgotten this.

"How much further?" she questioned, as they hurried through several remote streets, and night was upon them.

"Not far," was the blunt answer.

Her heart fluttered. Where could he be leading her?

"Turn back! Turn back!" whispered a voice within her.

She slackened her steps—would have paused, irresolute.

"Come on. 'Most there," said the African.

A few more blocks were gone over; still that inward voice cried:

"Turn back! Turn back!"

It was now fully dark. The street-lamps were casting their first faint glimmer on the pavements.

Cecilia stopped short. A conviction that all was not right now fixed upon her.

"See," urged Nemil; "only one square more. There's the house."

She saw a large, gloomy structure looming up in the darkness ahead.

Again her thought of Reginald conquered her doubts.

"He's waiting there," added Nemil, persuasively; but his eyes were aglow with a fiendish light.

She started forward with her guide; and again came the whispering voice:

"Turn back! Turn back!"

The mysterious warning was in vain. The house was reached.

"Enter!" he said, as some one swung open the door, in answer to his pull at the bell.

She obeyed, and found herself in a large hall, where evidences of wealth glittered on every side.

Nemil stepped quickly in after her, and as he shut and locked the door, he placed his back against it, while a low, guttural, savage laugh issued from his thick lips.

Before Cecilia, her radiant charms dazzling in their show, stood Orle Deice; and the dark orbs of the beauty flashed a fire of hate as she contemplated her entrapped rival.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEMPTER.

"And, thirsting for revenge, I ponder still
On pangs that longest rack and latest kill."
—BYRON.

WITH the raising of the stakes, Reginald Darnley's luck changed with singular suddenness. Instead of winning, as at first, he began to lose.

Three successive games went against him. The old man seemed to win with marvelous ease.

If Reginald could stack the cards, so, also, could his opponent; if he could cheat a little—the old man was foremost in that; and those who were looking on, bound, in honor, to silence, smiled as they saw each player warily hold a good card on the knee beneath the table.

Young Darnley brought to bear his most telling plays, favorite tricks—all of which were promptly met and defeated by his antagonist.

He of the green spectacles played on, with a calm, unruffled exterior. Reginald grew more and more excited.

"Enough! I am drained!" as the old man drew in the last stake.

"I am sorry, indeed. You have a watch, I perceive."

The last suggestively.

The watch was staked—and, lost.

"You wear diamonds, sir," with oily persuasiveness.

The diamonds were staked—and lost! rings and studs.

"I bid you good-day, sir," and the fortunate stranger, after paying table-fee, departed, leaving Reginald penniless.

A low murmur came from the crowd who gazed after the lucky winner.

For some time the young man sat in speechless despair; then, arising hurriedly, he made his way through the group that discussed his misfortune and passed out.

Near the entrance, as he left the steps, some one tapped him on the shoulder. It was his late opponent.

"Well!" he exclaimed, bitterly; "what can you seek now? You have ruined me! Do you wish to mock me?—a beggar!"

"My friend," said the mild voice, "you are wrong. No—I would not mock you. My intentions are far different. You say you are ruined?"

"Ruined!" groaned Reginald.

"Then I would befriend you."

"Befriend me?"

"Yes. See—as I was leaving the table, I picked this up."

Reginald snatched the paper which the other extended. It was the note in which Mervin Darnley had disowned his son. Another moment, and it flew in bits out to the gutter.

"How came you by it?" he asked, reddening.

"In using your handkerchief it fell from your pocket. I have read it. It is a serious thing. You need a friend. I am the one who will befriend you."

The red dye of Reginald's cheek grew deeper. Who, till now, would have dared say he needed a friend to sustain him before the world? It was a stinging utterance, and his first impulse was to resent it. But the hot blood that mantled his brow receded as he realized how much truth there was in the words. He looked searchingly into the speaker's face, and said, with evident emotion:

"Look! You have made me a penniless wretch! Now, you proffer friendship. Think well of your words, for I am in no mood to trifle. I am desperate. Do not play with a desperate man. Do you mean what you say?"

"Come with me, and you shall see. No, I am not trifling. Penniless!—yes, it's enough to make any one desperate. I regret that I beggared you at the game; but, come along, come along, and let us see whether I am sincere or not."

His voice was of pious depth and sympathizing tenor. As Reginald locked arms with him and the two moved away, he added, inquiringly:

"Your name is Reginald Darnley?"

"Did not the note you picked up tell you that? Yours?"

"Mine is Henricq—Gerard Henricq."

"And your business?"

"Gaming. Yes, I have made it a study, a profession. I live wholly by it. Few can play better than I; and very many old hands at the business have been beaten as cleverly as I did you. But you play a close, shrewd game, young man—very, I grant you that."

"Mervin Darnley is wealthy," continued Henricq presently.

"Ay," said Reginald, with a bitter accent; "he is wealthy, and I, his only son, am reduced to absolute poverty."

"Ah, young man, you must profess, if you do not actually possess, a wider knowledge of the world than to give 'way under such an occurrence as this."

"Your meaning, sir?"

"Oh, tricks, schemes, battles, and the like."

"I do not understand."

"Schemes to recover that which you have lost," with low emphasis, while the eyes glistened behind the spectacles.

Then he added, before Reginald could speak:

"Let us get off the thoroughfare, and in a place where we can talk privately."

Entering a restaurant, they ascended to the second story, secured a room, and ordered refreshments.

Gerard Henricq's bland, polite carriage and profession of friendship had already won the confidence of his younger companion, and it was not long before Reginald poured into his ear minute details of his situation.

When mention was made of the summary dismissal of the valet, Henricq's sallow face colored slightly, his eyes filled with fire, and a peculiar smile wreathed his lips. But this was only for a moment.

"I am now more than ever interested in your welfare," he said. "Besides, your story makes me regret the deeper that I should have played against you at cards—"

"Say nothing of that!" interrupted Reginald. "What you have won is fairly yours."

"But," pursued the old man, "you will oblige me by accepting your watch and studs. A gentleman looks awkward with his shirt bosom loose," handing over the articles.

Reginald did not refuse them.

"I said I would befriend you," spoke Henricq, slowly, after having seemed to weigh something in his mind; "and, as you are pinched, I will begin at once. You have no money?"

"Not a dollar," was the dejected reply.

"Here are fifty. I'm going to be your banker."

"Can you mean it?" bewilderedly.

"There is the money. Do you want more proof?"

Reginald received the amount with a grateful heart, and thanked his new-found friend for the generous gift.

"I will supply you with money whenever you are in need," added that winning, subtle voice.

"I am under obligations that I fear I shall never be able to cancel," said Reginald, now looking upon his benefactor almost as a messenger from Heaven.

"I shall expect you to return all I lend you."

This speech was stunning. Reginald looked at him blankly. How was it possible to pay him anything back, without resource?

"That I cannot promise, Gerard Henricq. You had best withhold your proposed bounty."

"Stop—you can safely promise, if I read you aright," were the strange words, intended to relieve the young man's embarrassment.

A whispering silence followed. The two men looked steadfastly at each other.

What could Gerard Henricq mean? What significance was there in those mild sentences—those confident assertions? His manner was, imperceptibly, growing more oily, more engaging; his words were singularly forcible in the calm utterance.

"Gerard Henricq, explain yourself. How am I to repay you?"

The old man turned his gaze to the carpet and hesitated. Presently he said, while he smoothed his beard thoughtfully:

"Mr. Darnley, your situation, as you have remarked, is a desperate one."

"Ay, desperate!" was the prompt rejoinder.

"You realize it?"

"Fully."

"And yet you do not consider how easy a matter it would be to place yourself above want, to obtain a position even more independent than heretofore."

Another pause. Reginald was silent.

The old man arose, and going to the door, locked it, after which he returned to his seat and said, in a voice still lower:

"Speak guardedly now; I'm going to tell you something."

"Hurry, then."

Reginald's curiosity was burning him.

"As I said, you are desperate—"

"Enough for anything."

"Ha! Now I have my reins. Then, why allow yourself to be barred from the luxury of a fortune, when a little—so little—determined action will adjust things to your benefit?"

"You speak in riddles."

"Has not your father already made out a will, in which the bulk of his wealth is bequeathed to you?"

"He has; how do you know it?"

"I do not know it; I merely judged the likelihood—you being the only child—"

"And how do you know I am the only child?"

For a brief space Henricq seemed embarrassed.

"You told me so just now."

"Perhaps I did," admitted Reginald, musingly, though he had no recollection of having done so.

"Would you suppose now," the old man continued, "that your father had destroyed the will and made out a new one?"

"Having disowned me, it is reasonable to suppose the will has been destroyed in which I was to be benefited."

"And has there been time to make out another?"

"I think it hardly possible," answered Reginald blindly.

It would seem as if Henricq was gradually exercising a sort of mesmerism upon his younger companion.

"Then"—the low voice sunk lower—"why permit a new one to be made out at all?"

"Ha! what—"

"Stay!" lower still, until he spoke in a whisper; "is it not possible that Mervin Darnley might die before another instrument could be made out?"

"Gerard Henricq!—you mean—"

"Stop, stop," he interrupted, as he perceived that Reginald was staring and excited, for the hint was understood. "Stop, now; this is a weighty subject, and you must retain your wits."

"But, you have hinted—that—my father—must—" he was articulating breathlessly.

"He is not your father, Mr. Darnley," smooth, oily, and two rows of white teeth—unusually sound for a man of his age—glistened behind the parted lips.

"Not my father!" Reginald's breath came short and quick.

"Has he not disowned you? If you are not his son, then, certainly, he is not your father? He is but a barrier between you and your means of support."

Reginald's eyes were dancing in excitement; a red haze hovered in his vision. His cheeks were scarlet in a feverish glow; the blood in his veins was boiling; a subtle coil was gathering round his heart—the serpent had struck!

"You would have me kill him!" he cried huskily.

"Otherwise poverty escorts you to the grave."

"You forget I have a good arm to toil with."

"Ah! you command a trade?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You evade the question. Have you learned a trade?"

"No—but—"

"So I thought. Do what I suggest, before another will is made out, and, even if you are correct in your suspicion that the first will is destroyed, a goodly sum will yet be yours."

"Murder! Horrible! I can't—I won't!"

"Think of it. You will see the necessity," urged the serpent. "Besides, you may repent afterward, if you choose—and, you know, sin with repentance is better than prayers with pride. Think of it—think!"

Reginald sprung from his seat and strode back and forth across the room, pressing his hands to his heated, throbbing temples, while he revolved the terrible suggestion in his brain.

Gerard Henricq quietly eased back in his chair, drew forth a penknife, and leisurely began paring his nails.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECOND BLOW.

"* * * * * Into what abyss of fears
And horrors hast thou driven me; out of
which
I find no way, from deep to deeper plunged!"
—MILTON.

"Shades of departed joys around me rise,
With many a face that smiles on me no
more."
—ROGER.

SUDDENLY Reginald Darnley paused before the wily tempter.

"Gerard Henricq, how is this to be done?"

His voice was broken, as if by a choking at the throat; his face glowed with an unnatural heat.

"Very easily, Mr. Darnley, very easily, if you will obey my instructions," the last with affected humbleness.

"I will do it!"

"You have determined wisely."

The gray head nodded approvingly; then he continued:

"Now, be firm in your determination."

"As a rock!" hoarsely. "He has cast me off, and but for you I would now be hungering for a meal. It is his life or mine—and it shall be his!"

"Very wise—very," smiling in a patronizing way. "I foresaw that you would conclude properly, and your firmness of purpose makes me more your friend than ever."

Satan triumphed through Gerard Henricq. The first work of this seeming friend was to urge a desperate man to heinous crime.

Reginald sunk again into his seat. Henricq drew his chair nearer.

"The next thing, Mr. Darnley, is to arrange our plan of operation."

"You may do that," absently, his thoughts wandering.

The young man was gazing along the uncertain corridor of great "To Be." He looked upon the different paths before him—one of poverty, the other blazoning in wealth; the latter attainable through a fiendish deed. As he meditated, he did not ask himself why this serpent friend should take so great an interest in him, or why he should propose an act so horrible. Had he done so—

"O—h, n—o," protested the old villain, hypocritically; "you are granting too much. You may think I am interested beyond your welfare."

"No, do as you please," in a steady, indifferent whisper.

"Very well, very well; if you will leave it to me, I'll attend to it—arrange for you, that is. But you will see that the thing must be done quickly; there is no time to waste."

"Yes, it must be done quickly," still in that abstracted mood.

"Come here this evening, Mr. Darnley, and I'll communicate a feasible plan."

"This evening," assented Reginald.

"Let it be eight o'clock."

"Eight o'clock."

"Then I'll bid you good-day. Remember—eight o'clock."

With a low bow, another exhibition of the white teeth, as a smile of hidden meaning curved his lips, and stepping noiseless as a cat, Gerard Henricq withdrew. As he descended the stairs, he rubbed his hands together and muttered, hissing:

"How much better is my plan!—how much better! He will destroy himself! Matters are working finely. Disowned—penniless—desperate. It is well! Ha! ha! ha!" a low, devilish chuckle issued from his lips.

Canceling his check at the bar, he passed out to the street and hurried away.

Reginald Darnley sat long alone, thinking of the shades that were gathering like fated clusters around his life. He went over again, in mind, the scenes of the last twenty-four hours, the brief space in which he was cast from the waves of peace and luxury to the barren sands of anguish and poverty.

He meditated upon the act he was about to perpetrate; and, in oblivious reverie the in-

voluntary tremor of a guilty conscience twitched the muscles of his handsome face—the slightest rustle startled him.

"Murderer!"

How that fearful word kept ringing in his ears, even before he stained his soul with the crime!

Full an hour passed. A footfall in the entry roused him, and, starting up, he hastily left the room, left the scene of plot with the man who was weaving his destruction.

The fresh air of the street calmed him somewhat; but a queer, unnatural feeling weighed upon his heart, which caused him many an anxious start as some passer-by looked him in the face.

A man walking slowly along on the opposite side of the street attracted his attention. It was Mervin Darnley.

Their gaze met; but, in an instant, the manufacturer looked in another direction, and Reginald, following him with his eyes, muttered:

"Curse him!—ay, curse him! for he is no longer my father, but the would-be destroyer of my future. He avoids notice of me, as if I were a mere dog! Gerard Henricq, you have served me well!" and with quick steps he resumed his way.

Ah! how totally was the past erased. He would not recall those days in which a doting parent had supplied his every want and looked hopefully forward to a manhood that should perpetuate an honored name.

The flame of hatred and malice so adroitly kindled by the old man was, by this meeting, fanned to a consuming blaze.

Reginald sought his rooms. There he fell again upon that meditation of his situation, and to his thoughts came a vision of Orle Deice. Long he revolved the matter of the letter in his burning brain; long he tried to believe that the beautiful girl could not have sent a messenger to his house on such a mission, when forethought would have shown the result.

But, at last, he could not resist the creeping conviction—with all its mystery, it did seem probable, and, finally, he concluded it must be so. And then, in his belief, he cursed her for the deed.

A distant church-bell echoed the notes of its clarion tongue upon the drowsy air, and broke the spell which had held him silent, thoughtful, for hours, in his chair.

He descended to the street. How strange everything appeared—how very lonesome! Sensations unfelt before seemed to fasten upon him from the surrounding atmosphere.

"Seven o'clock," he mused, consulting his watch. "I have an hour yet. Ah!"—a thought struck him—"I'll devote that hour to a good purpose."

He hailed a cab, and directed the man to the residence of Lacy Bernard.

Twilight's dusk had veiled the thoroughfares when he reached that gentleman's house.

The servant who opened the door to him betrayed an agitation that was mysterious. A sound of commotion reached him from within.

What was the matter? This question he asked himself, and then asked the girl.

"Cecilia!" was the one word stammered forth in reply.

"What is it? What of her?" he cried.

But she made no answer, and began to weep.

An indescribable dread shot through him; he pushed her aside and hurried into the parlor, where he found Mr. and Mrs. Bernard—the latter in tears.

This scene increased the agony of suspense within him. Had anything happened to Cecilia? If there was one honorable link in the sullied chain of Reginald Darnley's character, that exception was his love for the daughter of Lacy Bernard; and the foreboding tableau which met his gaze, the utterance of his loved one's name—these combined to fill him with acutest fears.

"Mr. Bernard—has anything happened—to Cecilia?"

His voice faltered as he put the question.

Bernard had arisen upon his entrance, and stood looking at him.

There was a strangeness in the old gentleman's gaze, which tended to augment Reginald's uneasiness.

"Yes, sir; something has befallen her."

The answer was cold, distant.

The questioner paled.

"What—what has—"

"No matter, sir."

What meant the brief, icy tones in which Lacy Bernard addressed him? He trembled. A strange awe seized him.

"Mr. Bernard—"

"I say it is no matter, sir. Be kind enough to leave me, Reginald Darnley."

"But, sir, what means all this? Where is Cecilia? Why do you treat me with such coldness? Mr. Bernard"—and his speech warmed—"considering what Cecilia is to me, you mock me. I would see her."

"My daughter is nothing to you."

"Nothing to me!" he cried. "She is everything!—life, hope, idol—"

"I say she is not!" fairly thundered Lacy Bernard, taking a step forward. "My child is nothing to a gambler and libertine like yourself! Do you understand me, sir? Your engagement with her is broken—I here break it. More: I desire that your visits to my house cease."

The young man staggered back. A cloud swept over his vision. His brain reeled.

"Mr. Bernard—stop! Heavens! you are—"

"No more, sir! You have heard. Merwin Darnley visited me this afternoon, and, thank Heaven! that visit has prevented the sacrifice of Cecilia to a man whom I can but despise! One who must be disowned by a father generous as yours, sir, is no fit mate for my child, no fit guest at my house. Now, let me hope you will begone!"

Crash! crash! like thunderbolts struck those words upon the breathless listener. Cecilia lost to him! All standing gone! The grave were welcome at such a moment!

Half groping his way, Reginald fled from the house.

The cab awaited him at the door, and, like one whose actions were governed by a mechanical influence, he threw himself in upon the cushions.

A loud whip-crack, and the vehicle sped away.

"Dong!—dong!—dong!" the three-quarter stroke of a near clock. Quarter to eight. The outcast, as he sat gazing down at the carpeted floor of the cab, seemed dead to all around.

The driver, in obedience to the brief directions he had received, drew up before the restaurant where Reginald was to meet with Gerard Henricq.

The young man drank deeply of wine which he ordered, as he sat at a side-table, endeavoring to calm his turbid senses.

Disowned! An outcast! The woman he loved torn from him! she for whom he felt he had embittered the life of Orle Deice—as he thought of Orle, he frowned, and a dire anathema came whisperingly from his lips. She had poured this gall upon his existence by writing the telltale letter!

"O-h! Orle Deice, may all the plagues of the earth seize you for this! May your nights be sleepless as mine will be! May every breath of life be a poison to you, and every dream a torture to rack your mind!"

His nervousness was intense. The clammy paleness of his face was now succeeded by a feverish glow; the liquor burnt his lips. He glanced restlessly at the clock. One minute to eight.

"Will he never come?" he muttered, impatiently.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEAUTIFUL FIEND.

"Despair—before whose blast the voice of song,
And mirth, and hope, and happiness, all fly,
Nor ever dare return."

—KIRKE WHITE.

CECILIA BERNARD gazed upon the lovely girl before her as she would look upon a picture inspiring awe—silent and wondering.

Then, as she marked the flash of the beauty's eyes, the excited heaving of her bosom, an inexplicable thrill pervaded her motionless form.

The few seconds' silence which reigned was teeming with dread whispers—strange,

invisible things murmured a warning of danger in her ears.

Involuntarily she turned her head to look at Nemil. He stood with his back placed firmly against the door; a vengeful gleam was in his leering eyes; a fierce expression rested on his coarse lineaments.

"You can leave us together for a few moments, Nemil," Orle commanded, and the negro retired.

Again Cecilia looked at Orle, and strove to speak; but some palsying power sealed the lips in trembling surmise.

"So, Cecilia Bernard, you are my rival?" Orle's voice was not now of a low sweetness, but, in the excitement of triumph, it was sharp, even piercing.

"What do you mean?" panted Cecilia; finding breath at last. "Where is Reginald?"

"Ha! ha! ha! Reginald!" with mocking sarcasm. "You ask me where he is? Hated rival—he is anywhere but here."

The red blood suffused her cheeks; even her pure forehead was crimsoned.

Cecilia's face was pale as death; an acute terror fastened on her every nerve.

"Woman!" she cried, "what means this? Why am I brought here? Who are you?"

"Did you not expect to see the man you love?" quick and short.

"Yes, yes; but he is not here."

"No. Instead, you see one who loves him twice, thrice as much as you!—one who would move the very earth to keep him from the caress of another! I am Orle Deice! Reginald Darnley is mine! Do you begin to understand?"

There was a frenzy of resentment, a fiery emphasis in her words, and Cecilia recoiled before the gaze of those black, flashing orbs, as they riveted upon her.

"I am deceived, then? Reginald is—"

"Deceived?—yes. Reginald Darnley is not here."

"And what is your motive?"

"Can you not see? Are you blind, girl?"

"I cannot see. Your words are ill and strange."

"My object is to keep you from him. He is mine! No woman on earth shall have him but me; and I have sworn—wo! wo! to any one who shall strive to win him from me!"

Orle was becoming more excited with each moment; her lustrous eyes glittered like twin stars through the scarlet of a Northern sky; her neck, and the peeping marble of her bosom, were also dyed by the warm mounting of the blood.

In hate, in triumph, in the fever of an uncontrollable passion, she gazed upon the shrinking form of her captive.

Tottering dizzily, an abject terror whitening her features, Cecilia gasped:

"What—what do you intend to do with me? My God! What horrible snare have I fallen into? Woman—if you are a woman—will—would you murder me?"

"Murder you?" cried Orle, and she seemed struggling with some words which were already at her lips' verge. "No—I have other use for you. Your life is of more value to me than would be the satisfaction of your death. But I could kill you!—I could, Cecilia Bernard; for I hate you!"

"Have—pity!" breathlessly.

"Pity? Pity for one who would take my idol from me!"

A sense of utter despair crushed the helpless girl; things seemed swimming in her vision. What fearful doom was in store? What dreadful torture at the hands of her rival awaited her? she asked herself, as Nemil at that moment reappeared.

"Pity," she moaned, her tender nature sinking under horrible fears, for she realized how completely she was at their mercy.

Suddenly, Orle Deice, as if by a mighty effort, dispelled her excitement.

"Bring her, Nemil," she said, calmly, "and follow me. Quick!—she is falling!"

Cecilia staggered forward, and would have fallen but that Nemil quickly caught her in his muscular arms and lifted her up as if she were but a mere child.

At his touch a spirit of loathing roused her and she struggled wildly. As well a trial to break a band of iron, as to throw off the grip which held her. Then one long, loud shriek

issued from her lips as she was borne up the staircase, Orle preceding them.

As they ascended the stairs, a door on one side of the broad hall was opened, and Meg Semper came upon the scene.

Cecilia was carried up, up, through an unlighted entry, into a back room in the third story, all the while lying unconscious, helpless in the hands of the huge African.

This apartment was destined to become a prison, and, in this instance, it would serve admirably. There was no carpet, no furniture save a rude straw couch in one corner, and a table at one side, on which was pen, ink and paper. The walls were paneled. At a height of about eight feet was a small square window with the sash removed.

"This won't do," said Meg, as she struck a match and lighted a lamp. "This isn't the place for her. Better put her in the cellar."

"Never mind; it will answer for the present."

"But, hadn't we better put her in the cellar?" persisted the hag, whiningly.

"Cavil on't, now, and I'll drop what I hold," interrupted Nemil, frowning.

Meg Semper said no more. At a sign from Orle he deposited his burden on the straw couch, and then drew back as the two women bent over her.

"She's fainted," said Meg.

Orle was silent. She was gazing down into the fair face of her captive, while strange, fierce thoughts were chasing through her mind.

"Maybe she's dead," grunted Nemil, folding his brawny arms, drawing a deep breath and stepping further back.

For a brief space unbroken stillness reigned.

The hag sprinkled water in Cecilia's face, and when the latter showed signs of returning consciousness a cup of the cool beverage was placed to her lips.

"Come, now, wake up. Wake up, I say. Ha! you're coming to at last—well, now?"

Cecilia wearily opened her eyes and looked at the hideous countenance above her. Then she saw Orle; and, presently a dark figure on the opposite side of the room, was included in her wandering, bewildered gaze.

"Where am I?"

"Oho! safe enough," yelled Meg, shrilly, her sharp tones echoing in the apartment like the scream of a bird.

"But, where—where?" as a picture of what had happened slowly burst upon her.

"In prison, my chick."

Orle spoke at this juncture.

"Imprisoned and in my power, Cecilia Bernard."

A low moan came from the helpless one.

"Prison? No, no; let me go from this! I never did you harm!"

"Ay, but you have," quickly rejoined Orle. "You love the man whom I love. In that you have sinned against me."

"Oh, Reginald! Reginald!" Cecilia buried her face in her hands, to shut out sight of those who, she felt, were resolved to do her ill.

"Look up," commanded the beauty; and she added to the African: "Wheel the table, Nemil."

He pushed the table close to the bedside.

"Look up! Look up!" screamed the hag. "Do you hear, eh? Devils a loose! she's going to faint again."

Cecilia had started to a sitting posture; her body was swaying, one hand was extended, waiving, as if a mist was before her.

But Meg Semper's shrill cry prevented the threatened swoon. Straightening herself up, she cried:

"Inhumans! what are you going to do with me? Do you propose to kill me, Orle Deice, because my love has been more valued than yours? Cowards!—three of you—and one a powerful man—to mock me, single, weak, helpless as I am! Speak your intentions. Sooner death than suspense like this. Speak, demon in the form of beauty! Speak, vile woman; what are you going to do?"

A new dye crimsoned the brow of Orle Deice. It was not now the color of excitement, but a warm, weakening blush, occasioned by the cutting words of her rival.

"You shall see," she hissed, her dark

orbs sparkling. "Get up; turn to this table."

"For what?"

"Do as I say," in a tone of fierce command.

Cecilia hesitated.

"Get up," snapped Meg.

"Ay, get up," growled Nemil.

Trembling, the girl obeyed. Awe, fear, an unnatural something made her comply.

"Now, what—what shall I do?" The inquiry was scarce audible.

"Take up the pen and write as I dictate," said Orle Deice, leaning over her.

"Well?"

"These words: 'To Reginald Darnley—'"

"Ha! what would—"

"Obey me, girl," frowning, while Meg Semper scowled darkly.

"Yes—obey," another growl from Nemil.

"Reginald Darnley," repeated Cecilia, as she wrote. "What next?"

"I have been aware of your intimacy with another—"

"Well?" her hand trembling nervously.

"And, as it seems you have proven false—"

Cecilia dropped the pen.

"I will not write it!"

"You will."

"I say I will not," she cried, determinedly.

"Refuse, at your peril."

"Do your worst! He is not false! I will not pen such words!" and her resolution seemed to give her strength, for she started up and faced her captors with an air of defiance.

"I say you will." The voice was Meg Semper's, rustling in the quiet atmosphere of the room like a serpent's hiss, and the speaker slowly advanced, with her eyes fixed piercingly on Cecilia.

"No; I will not write it, though you rend me limb from limb."

"Yes, you will!" the hag drew nearer.

Nemil's face was blacker than a thundercloud. Orle Deice, as she now became a looker-on, watched the hideous contortions of the hag's face as she approached the defiant girl.

"You'll write it?—eh? Yes, you will—yes!" nearer she came.

"Never!"

"Choke you if you don't. I'll choke you!" a ferocious gleam in the flaming eyes and the talon-like fingers working convulsively.

"Do your worst."

With a quick, sharp cry, Meg Semper leaped forward, and, in a second, Cecilia was strangling in the murderous clutch of those snaky fingers.

"You'll write it?—eh? You'll write?"

"Never—urg-g-r! Never! Kil-g-ug—h-e-l-p! M-u-r-d-e-r!"

Hard and desperate struggled the frail form; loud that cry for help rung along the halls and entries of the large house, and Meg, uttering a savage oath, stopped the mouth of her weak victim, with one hand, while with the other she continued to strangle her.

Nemil looked stoically on. But Orle, unused to such scenes, bent forward, her lower jaw fell, her eyes fairly started; the fearful action of Meg Semper caused her heart to stand still.

"Don't kill her!" cried the beauty, gaspingly.

No answer. Tighter, tighter, that terrible hold. Cecilia's face purpled; the blue eyes were filming. Orle's bosom thrilled with horror as she saw the body relax, limply, in the hag's arms.

CHAPTER IX.

CREWLEY SMELLS SOMETHING.

"Gird thee, and do thy watching well."
—TUPPER.

HENRY WALDRON, after his parting with Cecilia, was gloomy enough as he walked slowly toward his rooms—gloomy, for a frown darkened his brow and his mind was perplexed with melancholy brooding.

Having graduated at one of our Northern colleges, Waldron had started on a tour through the Southern States, partly for enjoyment and partly in curiosity to familiarize himself with the scenes, centers, and

general geographic map of the late Rebellion.

While in the city of Richmond, he formed the acquaintance of a rather eccentric individual who roomed in the same house with him, and this acquaintance shortly ripened to a warm friendship.

Through this friend, he was introduced at the house of Lacy Bernard, and was at once drawn toward Cecilia by that subtle, sweet attraction which

"—Rules the court, the camp, the grove,
And man below, and saints above."

The attraction was intensified with the lapse of time, and soon his love grew to be a silent worship. Already had he deduced sufficient from her speech and action to know that she was not totally insensible to his passion, and, at last, he felt he had but to ask to receive.

How bright everything seemed to him, when he reasoned that a declaration of his love was sure to meet with most favorable reception! He conjured, in imagination, a blissful future—dwelt in hallowed reveries upon glad scenes in which Cecilia pictured as his cherished wife.

But the crisis had come—had passed. Where now were those fond hopes, those gilded castles of joy which buoyant thought had built? All had faded. Refused, but loved. Oh, unaccountable mystery! He saw no explanation; and hence the gloomy aspect of his brow as he thoughtfully traversed the streets.

Reaching his rooms, he found his friend and room-mate walking to and fro in an excited manner, gesticulating wildly and addressing himself to a pillow propped up on the table, while, with frantic vehemence, he rattled off something like this:

"Yes, your Honor—that an especially accumulated twelve, whose impartial consideration of prominent facts, evidences, affidavits and heterogeneous concomitants to undeniable statements whose authenticity is unquestionable, should, for the briefest particle of a moment, hesitate in arriving at a justifiable verdict of honorable acquittal, is, your Honor, I say, astounding, sir—astounding? sir, it is ridiculous, unprecedented, and implies a glaring incompetency to decide at all in the present case, where it is clearly proven" (hitting the table a thump with his fist, the pillow toppled and fell, and, readjusting it with a savage jerk, he continued) "that my client's cow has no horns, and, therefore, demonstrates the impossibility of its having horned complainant's cook-maid! And, your Honor—"

"Hello, Crewley, another case?"

Waldron advanced suddenly, and broke into his practice of a speech.

Yes, it was Christopher Crewley; and there, in one corner, stood the white umbrella, and on its handle was hung the worn silk hat.

The lawyer now wore a thin, faded linen duster, the sleeves of which were short, and the tail of which reached nearly to his heels.

Waldron's unceremonious entrance disconcerted him somewhat, but he replied with a nod, then restored the pillow to its place on the bed and resumed his excited walk to and fro across the apartment—mumbling incoherently about hornless cows, perjured cook-maids, belligerent clients, damages, acquittal, etc., etc., continually whisking over the leaves of a copy of "Blackstone," which he flourished spasmodically. Occasionally his steel-gray eyes were raised in pious solemnity to the ceiling, as if dwelling with pathos on especial points, or committing passages to memory from the book.

Waldron was not disposed to interrupt him further. Throwing his hat carelessly aside, he seated himself at a window, through which came a light breeze—that was refreshing to his heated forehead.

"Tink-a-link, link, link-a-link, link—" the dinner-bell sounded in the hall below.

There was a "slap," a "thud;" Blackstone fell to the floor, and Crewley puckered his lips and drew in a long breath, as if he scented the flavor of a tempting meal.

"Dinner!" he enunciated, briefly, looking at his young friend.

Waldron made no reply. He was gazing absently at a bed of roses beneath the window.

"I say—dinner!" repeated the lawyer, forcibly.

"I do not care to dine, Mr. Crewley."

"Pah! Get out! Who ever heard of such a thing? What—aren't you hungry? Sir, your digestion is out of order. Hear?—come on."

"Excuse me, Mr. Crewley."

Crewley looked at him blankly, as if he could not understand how a sane man could resist the temptation of a substantial repast; then, not caring to be last at table, he vented a contemptuous "Umph!" and strode from the apartment.

When the lawyer returned, half an hour later, he found Waldron seated where he had left him.

"I say, you know you're hungry"—in a high key.

"No, I am not."

"Wonderful! Well, I can't help you; bicarb. of soda do you good." (Picking up the book and resuming his study.) "'A cow without horns, to willfully horn a cook-maid, when'—I say, Harry, better go and eat some dinner!—is proposterous, and if—'"

"What have you got hold of this time, Crewley?"

"Oh! why, that same fellow—rascal!—who—who brought a case up before, where a thief stole his wife's tea-kettle, and then struck him over the head with it—retaining prisoner till result of wound was ascertained. Recollect? Meet him, to-night, at T—'s restaurant. Hasn't feed me yet. Fat goose, though—plenty of feathers. Court won't decide—blockheads! Clear case. But I'm off now. Better go down to dinner, you. Idea of a man refusing dinner!—hem!—bad sign. Try Duffy's Pure Malt— But good-by, now," and Crewley, slapping on his hat and grasping his umbrella, put Blackstone under his arm, and swung out of the room with those familiar two-yard strides.

Christopher Crewley had an engagement with his client at eight o'clock that same evening.

Returning to supper, he found Waldron still in that careless, abstracted mood, and, for the first time, imagining that something had crossed his friend, he ventured a few questions in his own inimitable bluntness. But his inquiries met with no satisfactory reply, and then he began to wonder.

His wonderment, however, was an after-consideration, just then, and he started forth to fulfill his engagement.

Crewley was punctual—as he always made it a point to be in everything—and pretty soon the party joined him. Over a friendly glass, they held a very satisfactory consultation.

The man had departed. Crewley was lingering yet, to "finish" the malt beverage he had ordered, when Reginald Darnley entered.

As the lawyer observed him, his brow knit.

"That's Reginald Darnley," he mused, inwardly. "Now, what's he doing here? Logic: not knowing, can't say. Report don't speak well of that young man. Loose habits, late hours, questionable associations, etc., etc. Know his father well. A nice old gentleman. Son isn't like him—not a diminutive bit. Plays cards, and all that. Something's the matter with him—so, drinks claret, and calls for it by the bottle. Bad sign—very bad!"

Involuntarily, the lawyer found himself deeply studying the young man.

As he watched, he marked that Reginald was extremely uneasy; saw his restless glances wander, anon, from the door to the clock and again to the door.

Crewley shook his head. He thought it a bad case.

"What a fine old 'pop' he's got, too!" ruminatingly. "I wonder if he knows the dare devil son he's supporting? Bad management in earlier youth—evidently very bad. He's waiting for some one."

Presently Gerard Henricq came in. The clock indicated the hour of eight precisely.

As the young man started up to meet his supposed friend, the latter placed a finger to his lips in a way that said:

"Be careful."

This action struck Crewley as singular. He watched the pair curiously.

Reginald called a waiter.

"Room 8."

"Do not speak so loud," cautioned Henricq; and the two, locking arms, followed the waiter up-stairs.

As Darnley and the old man passed within a few feet of the lawyer, the first said, interrogatively:

"Gerard Henricq, you have arranged for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Darnley. But wait—prudence. One whisper might betray us. I must insist that you—"

They were out of Crewley's hearing before the sentence was completed.

"One whisper might betray us," he repeated to himself, placing the handle of the umbrella to his lips and gazing fixedly at the floor. "Betray what, eh? Now, I wonder? Something's up. A conspiracy, no doubt. There's mischief afoot—bet my best hat on it. Room Eight, he called for. Shall I? Guess I shall. Why not? Room Six adjoins. Crewley, wake up—crawl, slip, jump! After 'em, now."

Wheeling round, quick as thought, he summoned a waiter.

"Hurry up, now—rascal! Room Six. Hear? Fly! Up you go. Tread on your heels, presently—shoot! Room Six."

Rooms Six and Eight were connected by folding-doors, which were closed and locked. A convenient keyhole pleased him as he caught sight of it.

"Liquor, sir?"

The waiter lingered for an order.

"Nary liq. Get out, now; maybe I'll call you directly."

Dismissing the man, he locked himself in.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOT TRAIL.

"And now, whate'er thou art, thou unseen prompter

That in the secret chambers of my soul

Darkly abidest, and hast still rebuked

The soft, compunctious weakness of mine heart,

I here surrender thee myself." —MILMAN.

WHEN Gerard Henricq and the young man were alone in their fancied security from eavesdroppers, the latter was first to speak; the quick, sharp intonation of voice betrayed how great was his impatience.

"Now tell me your plan."

"Directly," returned the old man, quietly. "First, seat yourself. Second, take my advice, and curb this impatience which unwarrantably consumes you—it's bad, Mr. Darnley; it may thwart our project. Cool purposes alone can be carried out successfully; therefore, I say, keep cool. Drink some wine."

He had ordered wine of the waiter, and Reginald, at the invitation, imbibed a heavy draught.

Gerard Henricq avoided the liquor, and as the young man set down his glass, he asked:

"Why don't you drink?"

"I never touch it."

"Well, proceed, now, quickly. What do you propose?"

"Easy, now," in a voice of tantalizing calmness. "Is your head cool?"

"Cool enough, sir. Will you come to the point?"

"Are you sure, Mr. Darnley, very sure, that you are equal to the task ahead? Have you braced your nerves? Is your determination strong as ever?"

"I am equal to it, and I am eager. I passed him on the street, after we parted, this morning, and he turned his gaze from me as he would from a—a—O—h! I am maddened! Tell me what to do, and how it may be done. I would have taken his life, to secure that which will keep the grim shadow of poverty from my heels!—since that meeting, I would do the deed in the strength of hatred! I hate him now!"

Those dark eyes, whose expression was so cunningly concealed behind the green spectacles, seemed given to strange, notable gleamings; for again, as on former occasions, they lighted with a glitter like the orbs of a basilisk.

"Remember," said Henricq, in a hissing whisper; "you are about to—to—"

"Commit murder!" prompted Reginald,

as the other hesitated; and his lips quivered.

The old tremor of excitement was upon him.

"Yes, it is murder—in one sense of the word," continued the old man; "but, properly viewed, it is merely a blow to save your own life. Poverty, nowadays, means, first, degradation; second, death. Charity is colder now than at any time since the creation of the world; sympathy, even though it cost nothing, is scarce. People delight in goading a fallen man; and, though you be pure as the crystal of ice, calumny forever dogs the helpless. Do you see the truth of what I say?"

"Your plan? Your plan?" half interrupted the listener. "A truce to further prelude. We are wasting time."

"To business, then, at once. We must accomplish our design by poison."

The low voice was even musical in its subtle cadence; the speaker leaned forward in his chair, and bent a deep glance upon the reddening face of his companion.

"Poison? Well," approved Reginald, as, with eyes riveted upon the carpet, and teeth hard set, he waited to hear further.

"Your father is in the habit of taking a goblet of ale every night before retiring—"

"How do you know that?" followed by a sharp, searching look.

"You told me so this morning."

"Did I? strange—I do not remember it."

"But you did."

"No matter. Go on."

"Am I not right?"

"Yes," and Reginald's gaze again fell to the floor.

"Now, Mr. Darnley, if you will contrive in some way to introduce the poison into the ale, I will guarantee that Mervin Darnley shall be dead within ten hours after drinking it—Ha! did you hear that?"

The two plotters started to their feet. An unmistakable sound, resembling a half-smothered exclamation, had interrupted the old man's speech.

"It is nothing," said Henricq, when they had listened for a few seconds. "We were mistaken. Only fancy."

Reginald was not so easily persuaded that fancy had deceived them; but the room offered no place for concealment, and presently both resumed their seats.

"Do you think you can introduce the deadly drug into the ale?" inquired the oily voice.

"Yes. But where is it?—the poison."

"Here."

As a small vial passed between the two men, their eyes met. Those behind the spectacles fairly scintillated—but it was only for a moment.

With hand outstretched, Reginald paused. Something familiar struck him. He was motionless, gazing steadfast; and through his brain flashed the question:

"Where have I seen those eyes before?"

"Take it," pressed the old villain, imperceptibly ill at ease under the other's studying glance; "and mark: ten drops will be sufficient. Ten drops will burn out his life—ten drops are to give you back your inheritance. Can you remember?"

"Yes," tightly clasping the vial in his palm.

"You do not waver?"

"No," huskily; and he added, as if, for the first time, the enormity of his guilt rose before him: "God! what—what if I should be discovered!"

"Pah! nothing."

"The hangman!"

"I see—you waver, after all."

"No—I do not!" vehemently. "You shall see that my nerve is greater than you suppose. Ten drops. It shall be done this very night."

"Speed and surety," whispered Henricq. "But, as you've shown a weak spot, let me tell you, there is no danger at all. It will be impossible to trace the cause of death to poison. and, even if possible, why should you be suspected? Make yourself easy on that point. But wait. It is better that you should be out of the city when the death occurs. I leave to night for Washington."

"I'll go with you."

"Sorry, but that can't be. I have com-

pany. Give the poison to-night, and by three o'clock to-morrow afternoon Mervin Darnley will have ceased to breathe. Then you can take the first morning train and be well away. Will this suit?"

"Oh, yes."

"This is Tuesday. On Thursday evening at eight o'clock meet me at Wambole's Saloon, Theater Row, Washington."

"I'll be there."

"We understand each other now?"

"Perfectly."

"Your nerve—"

"Is of iron."

"That's all, then. Remember—ten drops—no more, no less. Come, we'll go."

Together they left the apartment. On the street they separated, going in opposite directions.

Reginald was now resolved upon the fearful act contrived by Gerard Henricq; his breast turmoiled in a passion for revenge. The wrongs with which he deemed himself laden, had begun to weigh threefold under the cursed influence of one whose motives were heinous, though obscure; and with fierce meditation upon conjured injuries, and a feeling as of one unjustly oppressed, absorbing his heated thoughts, he hurried toward his late home to consummate—the murder!

Close on their heels, as they left the restaurant, came Christopher Crewley—his steel-gray eyes expanded, mouth agape, hat on the back of his head, and hands nervously swinging and twirling the white umbrella.

First after one, then after the other he looked. He had been an attentive listener to their conversation; he had heard discussed their fearful plot in which Reginald Darnley, urged by the vile serpent, was to poison his father; and his had been the exclamation which startled the schemers.

Little did he dream that, in keeping the engagement with his client, he was to become cognizant of a prospective crime, the perpetration of which might, reasonably, shock even the most brutal among men.

His ever-alert brain was now being taxed for a plan to prevent the horrible deed, while it should leave him free to follow the old man to learn more of such a mesmerizing fiend, who would be the instigator of so foul, heartless and damning a murder.

While innumerable projects tumbled and tossed confusedly through his mind, without any decisive result, the objects of his alternate gaze were gradually moving away from him.

His eyes rested on a policeman standing on the opposite side of the street, and he was suddenly relieved of his perplexity by a brilliant idea.

Hurriedly he tore a slip from his diary, scribbled a few words upon it; then, like a swift-spined arrow, flew across the cobbles.

"Here!" he cried to the officer, his voice so high-pitched that it broke in a squeak, "take this!—quick! Life and death! Mervin Darnley; corner of — and — streets. Know? He must have it right away! Poison! Life at stake! Lose no time! I'm a detective—see you all right. Shoot!" and, with the suddenness of a powder-flask he wheeled around after Gerard Henricq, who was just then turning at the nearest corner.

Like a shadow, a specter carved from the surrounding gloom, he noiselessly dogged the footsteps of his "game."

"Leave the city to-night, eh? If you do, you do; but if you do, may I be—hanged for a cut-worm! First-class murder!—it is! Wholesale slaughter of an unsuspecting man! Rogues, both! Why, it's abominable! Fine case! Wait till I get you housed—rascal! rascal! Ten drops of the poison, eh? Dead in ten hours, eh? Yes—but it's exploded! Scoundrels! Chris Crewley, L. L. D. Yours, forever, much—in spoiling dirty plots. Vagabond! Look out, now! I'm after you!"

Carefully avoiding the street lamps and the glare of shop windows—at times walking in the middle of the street—he never once removed his eyes from the man ahead, and silently continued the pursuit.

Gerard Henricq led him a long, tedious route. When at last the former stopped, it was at the back basement entrance to the large house occupied by Orle Deice.

The old man here produced a key and

swung open the door. As he did so, a faint cry came from the upper story.

Henricq paused. Crewley pricked his ears as he crouched behind a wagon that stood near.

A second later, Henricq disappeared.

"Deviltry afoot!" muttered the lawyer, now looking toward the upper windows. "So, he lives here! Good—I'll have him in jail before sunrise, and put a 'spider in his dumpling'! Wonder what that cry meant? Something's wrong; bet my umbrella on it. But I'm wasting time. Crewley—shoot!"

He was about to hasten away, when a light moved before one of the windows, and the shadows of several forms fell upon the thin curtains.

Instantly he was riveted.

Those within the house were descending the stairs. When they had reached the second landing (fortunately for Crewley's curiosity, the curtains of the window there were drawn back), he saw two men and two women.

One of the women he made out to be an old hag; one of the men was an African. The hag carried the light; behind her came the African, and in the latter's arms was what appeared to be the form of an unconscious girl.

Crewley's mouth yawned; he stretched his neck, as if the movement would enable him to see more distinctly.

They neared the window. For one second the rays from the light were cast full upon the negro's burden.

The lawyer's knees bent, his mouth opened wider; the white umbrella fell from his grasp; his whole appearance was one of wonder, amazement, stupefaction.

He had recognized Cecilia Bernard!

CHAPTER XI.

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

"Oh Hope! creator of a fairy heaven,
Manna of angels, rainbow of the heart."

—FAIRFIELD.

HENRY WALDRON sat alone in his comfortable rooms, smoking a cigar and thinking deeply. Through the window he gazed at the stars, as they came forth, one by one, and glistened in the mystic hues of a twilight sky; or, anon, he watched the blue vapor from his Havana, as it slowly ascended in the stilly atmosphere, as if in the smoky cloud was centered the picture of his meditations.

Night was stealing over the earth; enchanting murmurs vibrated gently on the hushed air; the slumbering day had gathered in its own gay voices, and Luna mellowed with her silver sheen the perfumed sleep of nature.

"In these deep solitudes * * * *

Where heavenly pensive contemplation dwells,
And ever-musing melancholy reigns."

He was dreaming, though awake, of Cecilia Bernard!

The more he thought upon the scene of the forenoon, the more inexplicable it became.

"She loves me," he mused, aloud; "she has told me that her heart is mine. Then how account for her strange refusal of my offer? Not even an explanation. And must I relinquish her because of what has occurred? Such love as mine is not to be quenched by these, the first difficulties in my path! Is there not much in my favor? Some painful influence is upon her. She would willingly accede to my wishes, become my wife, were it not for—what? Ay, what? Would that I knew. Would that I could burst this agonizing barrier, and bear her proudly away. Can it be that she loves another—"

A knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in," he said, absently.

A tidy colored girl entered, carrying a letter in her hand.

"Whar is you, Mis'r Wal'ron?"

She could not distinguish him in the darkness of the room.

"Here—what's this?" as she came forward and delivered the billet.

"A letter 'at jus' now come," and she with drew.

It was too dark to read, and, with a feel-

ing of curiosity, he hastened to light the gas.

"From Lacy Bernard," recognizing the old gentleman's handwriting.

In a second he had torn open the envelope; in another second he perused its contents, and, with a half-cry, half-exclamation, he crunched it in his hand and gazed vacantly, like one struck dumb.

The note was as follows:

"DEAR WALDRON:—Cecilia has disappeared. We are in great fear for her safety. Come to me. I would like to see you at once."
LACY BERNARD."

In five minutes he was bounding down the stairs. On the street he hailed a cab and ordered the driver to go at full speed.

Upon arriving at Bernard's house, it was fully after dark; Reginald Darnley's cab was just then dashing away down the street.

Striding past the servant who opened the door, he entered the parlor, and found Mr. and Mrs. Bernard seated there, lamenting their loss.

"Waldron—Waldron, I'm glad you've come! This is terrible!"

"But, Mr. Bernard, in Heaven's name! explain. Your note was just sufficient to torture me. Do you know nothing at all of Cecilia? When did you see her last?"

"A negro came to the house, about two hours ago, with a written message of some kind. Who it was from, or what it was, I know not; but the girl who carried it to Cecilia says she has not seen my child since that moment."

"This is strange, indeed," commented Waldron, thoughtfully. "And is there nothing more—no clue whatever?"

"None," groaned the anxious parent.

Mrs. Bernard here left the room.

"But," suggested the young man, after seeming to deliberate for several moments, "why grow uneasy so soon? Cecilia may have gone out upon some little errand of her own. She may be, even now, hastening home."

It might be expected that the father would grasp at this thin straw of hope; but he did not.

"No," he moaned; "if it were so, she would have let us know she was going. I know my child too well, to think that she would cause us such uneasiness. She would not do it. And to be upon the streets, at night, alone?—no, no, Waldron."

"Let us have some hopes," he urged, though his own heart was sinking within him.

"Alas, I can find room for none. No—she is lost! lost! Oh! God! my child!—my poor Cecilia." He sunk back upon the sofa and sobbed as only a strong man can sob when he feels his very soul crushed by a mighty woe.

"Stop! do not say all hope is gone. Forbear, or you will drive me mad! Let us be strong together. Something, surely, can be done—"

"What? Oh! if you could but answer what. We are blindfold."

"But, I tell you, we shall find her!" cried the young man, desperately. "Move the earth, if need be! Not one trial shall be left undone. By Heaven! I begin to feel, myself, there has been some treachery!" He was excitedly pacing the room.

Cecilia was too dear to him to be lost. Despite her discouragements of his love, his affection for her was inflamed to such a degree by this occurrence, as to border close upon idolatry. If he had loved, he now felt that her presence was necessary to his existence. At thought of losing her, his brain fairly whirled in a blind dizziness; his frame was quivering in excitement. If treachery had enticed her away, if she—so pure and gentle—had enemies, and those enemies were now detaining her, then, not a house in all Richmond but what should open its doors to a search for the missing one.

When he had enforced a reasonable calmness upon himself, the two discussed various plans of procedure. But no way seemed clear; nothing offered a light to their gloomed agony of mind.

An hour had passed, when there came a pull at the door-bell—a pull so quick, jerking, savage, that it nigh sundered the wires. The comer was Christopher Crewley.

The lawyer's sleeves were rolled up; his forehead was bathed in perspiration; his hat, so far on the back of his head that it threatened to fall off as he strode in, jostled and slipped with the spasmodic nodding of his thin head; he gesticulated frantically, flourished his umbrella, and seemed so out of breath as to render him incapable of speech.

Without a pause, however—sudden as a streak of light from behind a water-cloud—he darted forward and grasped Lacy Bernard by the arm, while the two men looked at him in astonishment.

"Bernard—your child!" he gasped, with an effort, his eyes fearfully distended in excitement.

"My child!" cried Bernard. "What of her?"

"Where is she, eh?" sharply, and panting the words.

"I do not know—gone! My God! I've lost her! I don't know where—"

"But I do!" He nodded so emphatically that the hat slipped over his brow and half-closed his eyes, imparting a rather comical climax to his speech.

"I say I do!" he repeated, shoving the hat up and hitting it a terrific slap on the crown.

"What's that, Crewley?—speak, man—again. Quick!" Waldron was by his side.

"You know where she is?—Cecilia!"

"Didn't I say so?" The reply so loud that it came near being a yell. "I know. Captured! Abducted!—no doubt of it! They've got her—"

"They! Who?"

"Don't know who—but I do know where. Isn't that enough? Come, now—jump! Fly! Shoot!—after her!"

The lawyer wheeled about, and started toward the door. For a second, Bernard and Waldron looked at each other; then they sprung forward after Crewley, whose coat-tail was just whisking out of sight at the front door.

"Tell Mrs. Bernard we've gone after Cecilia. Tell her to cheer up," Bernard addressed a domestic in the hall.

Christopher Crewley dashed on, and close behind him, with hearts palpitating in anxiety and hopefulness combined, hurried the lover and parent.

"Come on here, you!" exclaimed Crewley, as he found that he was distancing them.

At the nearest station the lawyer stopped to procure a search-warrant (he was fond of doing things systematically), and, their party increased by two policemen, they pressed forward again.

"Are you sure you know where she is, Mr. Crewley?" asked Bernard.

"Sure? Ever know me to tell a lie, sir? I'm just as sure of it, as I am that a horn without co—no, a cow without horns—can't horn a cook-maid. I may make you jump, when I tell you I've seen her."

"Seen her!"

"Yes, sir, seen her—s-e-e-n, seen! Now, hurry up, or they'll scalp her before we get there. What a wonderful night this has been. Poison!—ten drops! Leave town!—here, come this way," and he slid around a corner, his cranky body bent with the length of his strides, and the white umbrella rattled and thumped on the pavement at a fearful rate.

On went the rescuers, with Crewley in their lead. Pretty soon, the gloomy residence of Orle Deice loomed up before them, its grim exterior boding anything but the comfort, luxury and wealth that reigned within.

"Here we are, and here's what we're after."

"Where?" exclaimed Waldron, glancing about him expectantly.

"Jackass!—here, in this house. Quiet, now. Hang it! don't make a racket, or they'll scent a smell and shoot! There's a door at the back—one of you fellows go round there, and don't let 'em get out that way."

One of the policemen started for the back entrance, and Crewley ascended the steps.

"Now, let the warrior wave his sword!—we've got 'em—sure!"

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! went the ferule of his umbrella against the door-panel, and an ominous stillness ensued.

CHAPTER XII.

THE POISONED CHALICE.

"Now wield me
Thine instrument of havoc and of horror,
Thine to the extremest limits of revenge."
—MILMAN.

THE large house of Mervin Darnley was wrapt in silence.

Even at that early hour, before the many stores had ceased to flash and flare their brilliant lights upon the streets, there reigned an awing stillness in and around the old-time mansion, as if the very air that moved in its proximity were murmuring strangely of what was to come.

The numerous servants of the household, free from the duties of their several posts for the day, had—some of them—returned to their homes, and others were holding low converse in the kitchen—subject: young Mr. Darnley.

Through the "up-stairs" domestics, news of Reginald's dismissal was conveyed to brother and sister servants; and now, when relieved of work, they grouped together, near the open basement window, to discuss the affair and float opinions.

"It's a real shame!" exclaimed one of the females, whose prejudices were strongly against the action of Mervin Darnley.

"I don't believe he deserved it at all!" indorsed one of her companions, who, by the toss of her head and emphatic expression, betrayed how much Reginald was in her esteem.

"That's a fac', girls," said Jerry, the gardener, thoughtfully. "Master Rex allus treated me like he ought, an' no gentleman c'd do better. But, then, ye see, p'raps there's somethin' ahind it, after all; an' mebbe Mr. Mervin Darnley knows a-better what he's doin' than we think on—"

"But, 'tain't right; and I won't believe he done right in sendin' Mr. Reginald away!" interrupted one of his listeners.

"It's mighty queer to me," continued Jerry, half-musing, as he puffed vigorously at his short clay pipe and looked soberly down at the floor; "there seems to 'a' been a little somethin' wrong in the house of the Darnleys ever since—"

"Since what, Jerry?" inquired both the females, interestedly.

"Well, 'e see," removing the pipe from his mouth, and watching the smoke as it ascended from the bowl, "it's been a long, long time ago; but I was a-with them when they first married—"

"Mr. Mervin Darnley and his wife?" They were listening eagerly to the gardener's words.

"Of course. I say I was along 'ith them from the first, an' I knew they wasn't made for each other; but then I didn't say nothin'. I on'y c'd keep me mouth shut an' me eyes open—an', girls, it's been many the hard word Jerry Doan heard betwixt them."

"O—h!"

"Ye see—now, mind, she was an elegant Creole, as they call 'em, an' when Reginald's father marri'd 'er, she was just one of the loveliest creetur's ever winked at the stars in the blue sky. But, then, it didn't last—it didn't last."

"Go on, Jerry; go on."

Jerry Doan appeared to be thinking while he recovered the fire in his pipe, and, presently, he resumed:

"Well, as I said, it's many the hard word came from the two of them, an' it's many the row they had. Missus's temper was like the boil of a volcano, an', mind now, human natur' couldn't put up 'ith it. I tell ye, girls, she was a devil on the face of the earth! an' I seen her big eyes, a-sometimes, when they lookt like the sputter uv a pin-wheel. So master he wouldn't live no longer this way, an' he told her to clear out."

"Told her to go away, Jerry?"

"That's it; he told her to clear out from him. But then, the devil knows why she wouldn't go—" Jerry frowned and hesitated.

"Well, Jerry—well?"

"She wouldn't go out of the house at all."

"And what then?"

"Gad! he put 'er out. But, then, do ye think that was the last? Shrivell a bit! She hung around for a month or more, an' pestered him till 'is hair was gray with seein' of her. He went for a divorce—but, the imp!"

she went, too; an' the judge, he said, as they seemed of the same mind in that, they c'u'd be of the same mind in other things, an' therefore might as well stay man an' wife. So blank's the divorce he got. An' that's the reason he's never marri'd again; for 'e don't know if his wife's a-livin' or not."

"But, what else, Jerry? What became of her?"

"Hold on a bit—there's the bell a-jump-in."

A summons at the door-bell broke in upon their conversation, and one of the girls started to answer it.

"Does Mervin Darnley live here?" inquired a policeman, who stood on the steps.

"He does, sure."

"Is he in?"

"He is, sure."

"Will you give him this, then? Be sure he gets it at once. It is a matter of life and death." And, with this admonition, he departed.

It was a small piece of paper with penciling on it, and as the girl passed the entry light, on her way up-stairs, she turned it over and over in her hand, as if impelled by curiosity to strive to decipher the words.

When she had delivered the missive to Mervin Darnley, in his library, she returned to her companions in the kitchen.

Jerry at once took up the thread of his mysterious recital.

"Now, 'e see, as I said, this woman—meanin' the Creole—was of the devil's own humor sometimes, an' it's a bit of a wonder to me that she didn't do her husband some harm, at night, while he slept, for, I tell ye, girls, she did hate him, if ever a woman knew how to hate."

"But, you said he'd got rid of her?"

"Well, an' it would seem he did, at last; but, mind, afore she went away for the last time, she met 'im on the street one day—I was with 'im, carryin' of a lot of shrubs—an' the way them eyes of hers fired up, an' the way them lips of hers spit at 'im—well, it made old Jerry's heart kick some, now, I tell you."

"What was it? What did she say?"

"Now, I don't remember exactly—that she'd be even 'ith him, an' the like. Yes, an' I heard her say, 'at the day would come when every one who bore the name of Darnley, or knew a favor at the hands of a Darnley, should die—die an' onnatural death!'"

"O—h!"

"Yes, she was fierce enough. But then, that ain't nothin' to do with this affair, now, I guess. Girls—a new idea seemed working in the aged head of Jerry Doan—"ye know that snaky chap what's been playing valet to Mr. Reginald?"

"Yes!" they answered quickly.

"Now, then, did ye's ever remark how much he looked like Mr. Reginald?"

"Yes, I have!" they exclaimed in chorus.

"An' so have I. They look amazin' alike; enough to be brothers. It's me own wits I've puzzled a bit, thinkin' on it, and—"

"Dong!" A small gong-bell at one side of the room interrupted him.

"There's Mr. Darnley's bell. Get me the ale, Sary, an' I'll take it up to 'im, an' then I'll go to bed—" As he finished his speech, his mouth opened, and he gazed vacantly at the window, as if amazed by some sudden apparition.

"What on airth is the matter, Jerry?" hurriedly inquired one of the girls, marking the half-wild stare of his eyes.

"Sary—" breathlessly.

"What is it?"

"Did you see 'im?"

"Him? Who?"

"Mr. Reginald."

"Mr. Reginald! No. Where?"

"At the windy."

"You're dreamin'."

"Divil a bit! I saw 'im, Sary."

"Maybe something's happened to him," stammered the second female, with a shudder; "and it's our talkin' of him that's brought his ghost to look at us."

A simultaneous shiver crept over them. For several moments they waited, watched, listened. Not a sound or sight.

"Get the ale, Sary," said Jerry, at length.

The gardener's face was, naturally, very sober in expression, and it was twice so now. He felt sure that he had seen Regi-

nald Darnley at the window, which opened toward the garden, and, not being entirely free from the influence of superstition, the occurrence caused him much perplexity of mind.

When the maid had procured the ale—which it was Mervin Darnley's custom to drink, every night, before retiring—Jerry started up-stairs with the waiter.

As he neared the staircase leading to the upper story, he halted in dumb astonishment. Reginald Darnley was leaning against the balustrade, as if awaiting his approach.

"Come on, Jerry. Do I frighten you?" said and asked the young man.

"Is it you, sure enough, Mr. Reginald?"

"Yes—don't I look like myself? But, stop a moment, Jerry—I want you to do me a favor. I'm very dry; I want a glass of ale. Won't you bring me one? I was near the house when I first felt that I wanted it; and I knew if I saw you, you'd give it to me."

"Take this one, Mr. Reginald, an' I'll go get another for up stairs—"

"Oh, no; go get one for me. It will only take you a minute; and here's a quarter for you. I'll hold the waiter till you come back."

Eager to serve one for whom his esteem was not yet shaken, and not pausing to consider the singularity of Reginald's presence, Jerry handed over the waiter, and started to procure another glass of the beverage.

When he returned, Reginald drank the ale, thanked the faithful old servitor, and withdrew from the house.

Five minutes later, Jerry stood before his employer, extending the waiter that Reginald had held for a few moments in the hall.

"Close the door, Jerry."

"Yes, sir," promptly obeying the order.

Mervin Darnley took in his hand the glass containing the beaded liquor, and looked long into its amber depth.

Once he raised it slowly before the light, then lowered it again; once he put it to his lips, and withdrew it without tasting.

"Can it be?" he murmured, lowly; "would Reginald do such a thing?—no, no; I cannot believe it. I'll drink—I—" he had, for the second time, placed the glass to his lips, yet paused, hesitated, sipped not one drop.

Jerry watched him, with a mixed feeling of wonder and astonishment.

"Wait, Jerry," Darnley whistled, and in obedience to the familiar call, a pet spaniel came from behind a large easy-chair, showing pleasure at its master's notice.

"Come, Snap—come, my little fellow. Jerry, watch."

"Yes, sir." No need of the command—Jerry was straining his eyes.

The spaniel caressed its master's feet, and seemed joyed that it was called. Darnley smoothed its glossy hair, absently, as if hesitating in some course he had resolved upon.

Suddenly he forced open the dog's mouth, and poured the entire contents of the glass down its throat.

Jerry's eyes grew wider; his lower jaw fell a little; he was too amazed to speak, as he watched the spaniel slink away after such harsh, unexpected treatment.

"That will do, Jerry. No ale to-night."

The gardener related the singular occurrence to the other domestics. All wondered what it meant; and he was not the only one who dreamed strangely that night, in consequence of taxing the brain in an effort at solving the problem of Mervin Darnley's action.

But he soon learned what it meant, or partially so; for, about noon, next day, the manufacturer summoned him.

Under a solemn pledge of secrecy, the serving-man was led into the library, and his employer pointed toward a far corner.

There lay the spaniel, curled in a glossy heap, seeming to slumber. But the dog did not now come at the call of its master; not a muscle moved when Darnley whistled and coaxed; and Jerry, going up to it, saw that it was dead.

"Jerry"—the voice of the speaker was awfully sepulchral—"do you understand what that means? The ale you brought, last night, was poisoned! Had I drank it, I would now be dead as that dog!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FLINT AND STEEL.

"In all her lovely grace she disappeared."

—BAILLIE.

CHRISTOPHER CREWLEY's summons at the door of the gloomy edifice seemed not to have been heard by the occupants.

"Umph!" grunted the lawyer, impatiently, fidgeting about; "guess they're in bed."

The others half-stayed their breaths in the sensations of eagerness and expectancy which worked upon them.

Thud! thud! thud! thud! again the umbrella rattled against the door, and this time with savage vehemence.

"Fine chance to cool off, this!" muttered Crewley, with a pucker of his lips, a scrape of his throat, and resuming his uneasy movements.

Presently, a faint step sounded in the hall. Some one was approaching. Crewley straightened his hat on his head, adjusted his umbrella under his arm, and fixed his eye on the keyhole.

"Madam, good-evening—yours forever, much. Crewley—Chris Crewley—L. L. D., I am; come with power of law. No fooling; saw it—saw it, not an hour ago, at the back window. Cave! No use to growl; you're boxed. See? Come in here." The last to those who accompanied him.

He pushed past the one who opened the door—closely followed by his friends—and when they stood in the broad hall, he turned about to speak again.

He saw a slender, beautiful form, drawn to its full height; a shapely head, poised in a way that bespoke defiance; a pair of black, lustrous eyes, which fired with an angry look; and a mouth whose ripe lips were compressed in a stern expression of feature.

It was Orle Deice. Her soft cheeks flushed, and her bosom heaved; she contemplated the comers with a haughty glance, and her manner was that of one who awaited an explanation of what might be considered an unwarranted intrusion.

Her beauty engaged Crewley's attention. Her carriage set him to thinking. For several seconds, he looked at her in silence.

"My name's Crewley," he said, at last, pausing after it, as if he expected his words to produce some remarkable effect.

"Well, sir?" she inquired, in a cold voice, carrying her head haughtier than before.

The ice was broken, though; and Crewley, with a nod of satisfaction, immediately pursued:

"Aha! yes—well? Now, then—you've got a girl in this house who doesn't belong here. She's been abducted. I saw her at a back window. We've come with power of law—correct system—and there's no use in equivocating. See? Business. Trot her out. Give her up. Hand her over. Surrender. Put you in jail, if you don't. Fact!"

"Your words, sir, are simply enigmatical," was the calm rejoinder. "You have rather overstepped bounds, I think, by entering my house in such an unceremonious manner. It requires further explanation than what you have given, and I demand it. I cannot comprehend what you mean."

"Superfluous magniloquence, madam—I repeat, very superfluous. Take me for a flat? Um!—won't do. Lower your head. Come to the point. Can't fool with me. The girl—where's she, eh?"

"To what girl do you allude?"

Crewley gazed at her, studiously. Bernard and Waldron began to despair. Had Crewley met his match?

"Poh!—stuff! Good actress. Fine chance in New York for good actresses; but we've got sufficient of that regiment, madam, here in Richmond, without looking for them in private houses. Come—stop this nonsense, and bring out the girl. You'd better!" he concluded, with a pucker of his lips, and a peculiar intonation of voice, that told he was growing tired of cavil; and one of his forefingers was leveled significantly at her, whirling, the while.

Orle Deice colored deeply as the lawyer continued to address her in his sharp, brief style. But she was playing a part, and proved herself, as Crewley had asserted, an admirable actress.

"I do not understand you fully, sir," she said; "but I may infer that you seek some

one in my house who, you suppose, I am forcibly detaining."

"Exactly! Now, bring her out."

"Then you have made a great mistake. There is no one in this house but me."

"Madam, you I—excuse me, I mean to say, I know better. See?"

"If the word of a lady is insufficient to satisfy you, you had best look for yourself, since you say you come with power of law."

"Precisely what we'll do," he snapped, with another emphatic nod. Then to his companions: "Go to work. Search. Ransack. Open every closet. Sound the walls. Pull the window-curtains. Climb out on the roof. Garret to kitchen. Beware of trap-doors! Smells suspicious—perfumery."

"I will accompany them in the search."

Orle moved toward the staircase.

"Excuse me, but you won't," interposed Crewley, placing himself before her. "Now, see—I don't want to be too impudent; but, it strikes me, I ought to keep an eye on you—fact!"

Orle expostulated.

"It is my privilege, sir, to—"

"Can't help it. Won't steal anything—be assured. Besides, the place to commence is right here. There's a cupboard—see—behind the stairs. And just throw your eye into that room over there, while we go in here. Now, madam, you'll come in this room, with me, and there you'll stay till they find her—"

"Sir?"

"Tut! Paregoric. You'll find me the most agreeable company you ever met with—fact!"

Orle interrupted him.

"Cease this, sir. Your language is insulting. I am accustomed only to the society of gentlemen. No matter what your mission, it does not so far privilege you that you can, with impunity, indulge in the language of a ruffian."

She spoke short and quick, and the red flush of indignation suffused her cheeks.

But Crewley replied at once, and his words were shorter, quicker than hers.

"I'm a gentleman, madam—not of leisure, either. When I meet a lady, I'm courteous enough. But let me tell you"—and the steel-gray eyes seemed trying to sparkle—"a true lady never sullies her lips with the utterance of a deliberate lie. Now, maybe I'm putting it on too strong, but as it was not an hour ago that I saw, at the back window of your house, four persons, I know that you utter a falsehood when you say you are the only occupant of the house. See?"

"You will anger me, sir," she exclaimed, biting her lip till the soft skin would almost burst. "I will admit there have been others than myself in the house to-night—"

"A-ha! I knew it."

"But that does not prove that they are still here."

Crewley started. He hesitated. Perhaps she spoke the truth. Perhaps they had missed their object—arrived too late; it might be that Cecilia was, even then, being borne away to a more remote place of captivity.

Orle saw her advantage, and her eyes flashed upon him sternly.

"If you're right and I'm wrong," he said, at last, "then you may box my ears, madam, till the skin peels off, as a merit of my impudence. Meantime, we'll wait and see. Step in here."

Deeming it advisable policy to obey, she entered one of the rooms that sided the hall, and he followed her.

When he had wheeled up a chair for her, and seated her, with a bow, he threw himself into another chair near her, placed his umbrella between his knees, hung his hat upon the handle and eyed her steadfastly.

Already had Harry Waldron and Mr. Bernard, in company with the policeman, finished their search of the adjoining room, and were ascending the stairs. Crewley, as he sat like a statue before his prisoner—for such Orle indeed was—heard his friends in the rooms overhead, and, occasionally, the voice of Lacy Bernard calling his daughter's name.

At the expiration of half an hour they returned with the intelligence that there was no one in the house but themselves and Orle Deice—every nook, corner, shadow or conceivable place of concealment had been probed in vain.

Lover and father were despairing.

Crewley appeared greatly perplexed by the result. Orle looked at the lawyer in triumph. Her lips curved in a sarcastic smile.

"Madam," he said, presently, "as I agreed, you are at liberty to box my ears—"

"I desire nothing more than that you leave my house," interrupted she, quickly.

"So be it. Come—we'll go. You'll let us out the back way, please—back basement entrance, you know. See? Haven't looked down-stairs yet."

Orle made no objection to this request. She conducted them to the egress named, and, when they were well out, shut the door upon them with a spiteful bang.

"*Pax vobiscum!*" said Crewley, nodding toward the door. "Those hinges won't last long at that rate, madam."

He glanced about him for the policeman who had been dispatched to guard that portion of the house.

It was some time before his eyes used themselves to the surrounding shadows occasioned by the angles of the building.

When, at length, he could discern objects more plainly, his gaze caught a prostrate form, lying face upward, just on the verge of the shadows, and the moonlight discovered the blue coat and shining buttons of the man they sought.

With an exclamation of surprise, he sprang forward.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROOF.

"Can it be true?—or lie of fancy wrought?
And are his love-words, after all, but naught?"
—ANON.

WE left Cecilia Bernard in a fearful situation.

Insensible, limp, powerless in the clutches of the ferocious hag, her life seemed to have faded.

Meg Semper's basilisk eyes were fairly blazing in their fierce, Satanic stare, and both hands were now tenaciously twining about the throat of her victim.

Orle Deice trembled in every muscle. She would have stayed the horrible proceeding; her hands were outstretched and her lips moved, but not a word could she utter; a torturous power riveted her to the spot whereon she stood. She could not, though she would, bound forward to prevent the murder.

But, there was another actor. The sound of an approaching footstep fell upon their ears, and Nemil, with a malediction on the corner, sprung to the door, his brawny arm raised to strike.

It was Gerard Henricq. In the doorway he paused and quickly took in the scene, while Nemil, upon seeing who it was, vented a grunt and retired across the room.

At the first intimation of an intruder, Meg Semper dropped her half-dead victim, and, like a tiger at bay, she faced about, flourishing her long, glistening knife.

Orle tottered back a few steps and murmured a thanksgiving.

Murder was prevented by the opportune arrival of a fifth party.

"What's this?" demanded Henricq, frowning. "What are you doing, Meg Semper?"

"Herwin!" gasped Orle, pointing to the motionless form that lay upon the floor. "Murder! Quick!—help me," snatching up the pitcher of water and kneeling at Cecilia's side.

"Let her die!" screamed Meg. "Let her die! I did it! I choked the life out of her! She was loved by Reginald Darnley, and so it was a favor; and I've sworn to kill all who know a favor at the hands of a Darnley. Let her—"

But he pushed her aside and hastened to assist Orle.

On the throat of the unconscious girl were the hag's finger-marks—purpling and disfiguring the fair skin—and Orle feared that Meg had done her devilish work thoroughly. But there were signs of life, which grew

more and more apparent as she and the bogus old man applied themselves to her recovery.

"Oh, Herwin! is—she alive?"

Orle's tone was one of keenest anxiety, and she bathed and sprinkled the pale temples of her helpless rival, with a trembling hand.

"Yes," replied Henricq (as we shall continue to have him figure in this title); "but the room's too hot. She needs air. Here, Nemil, pick her up. Let's carry her down to the cellar. Meg Semper, you've nearly committed a foul murder—"

"I don't care!—do you hear?" she yelled, savagely.

"They punish murderers with the hangman's noose."

"I say I don't care!" more savage than before, and glowering fiercely at him.

He turned from her with an expression of disgust he did not attempt to conceal.

"Come, Nemil, bring the girl."

When the African took Cecilia in his arms, Meg Semper—who suddenly relaxed into a sullen silence—snatched up the lamp and led the way.

The cellars of the house were dry and cool. Their atmosphere tended greatly toward resuscitating the unfortunate girl.

When Cecilia opened her eyes—like one awakening from a frightful nightmare—she gazed slowly around upon the stony sides of her prison, and soon discovered, by the dim light of the flickering candle, the beautiful being to whom she knew she owed her misery.

Orle was alone with her rival. The beauty's head was bowed in thought. She appeared not to notice Cecilia's recovery, but gazed fixedly at the hard earth floor.

Starting to her elbow, and brushing back the wavy tresses that disheveled upon her brow, she pondered upon the lovely picture.

"Woman—"

The word broke upon her lips.

Orle started. The look she now fastened upon Cecilia was not what it was when the mastering emotions of an encouraged hatred burned within her bosom; there was a mild, unspeakable expression in the large, lustrous eyes; the face was calm, and her mien gentle.

"Cecilia Bernard," she said, softly, "I have nearly killed you."

"What has happened?" The inquiry was one of bewilderment. "I cannot remember all—yet—that woman-fiend! where is she? Oh, yes, yes—she choked me. I was dying. But I am alive. You have brought me here—what is this silent place?"

"No matter. Let it pass. You are saved. Your escape was very, very narrow."

Cecilia shuddered. Then she arose, with difficulty, to her feet. She felt very weak; one hand, almost involuntarily, sought a projecting stone in the wall for support.

Orle advanced to her.

"Cecilia Bernard, would you try to win Reginald Darnley from me, when you know how much I love him?"

The mildness in which she put the question was peculiar; there was a strange something lurking in the low accents, and Cecilia, studying the face and form of her lovely rival, hesitated.

"Reginald Darnley?"

"Yes. Would you do it, knowing how desperate I am in my love for him?"

"Do you, then, love him so deeply?"

"Yes," she cried, with eager fervency, "he is my idol! Next to my God do I worship him! I have been harsh with you—even too harsh. But it is past now; I was controlled by passion. You see me calm—see me humbler in that calmness, appealing to your heart. I can kneel to you, to beg that you leave him to me. Promise me you will not marry him. You cannot love him as much as I do; I know you cannot. There may be others—yes, I am sure of it!—who could make you happy; but not so with me—there is no one on the wide earth but him, who can give me happiness! I plead—shall I kneel?"

How great this change in Orle Deice! No longer blind, in the fiery impetus of hatred, but calmed and suffering, pleading favor of a rival. Hers was a quick-tempered blood; yet her nature was clad in the untarnished gold of purity. And when she

saw how near fatal had proved her ungoverned animosity, her conscience struck out the vile demon which, for a time, had entered her heart, and left her herself—gentle, loving, beautiful in spirit, as in face and form.

Her lustrous eyes were dimming with half-checked tears, as she thus appealed. She took Cecilia's hands in her own, and waited for a reply.

Cecilia was thinking deeply. She, too, loved Reginald; but was that love as deep-set as in Orle Deice? Did she feel that her whole existence was bound up in an affection for this man? Could she be generous? Would she relinquish him in favor of another? And—as she pondered in this way, she also thought of Henry Waldron, and wondered if she had, at last, concluded that she loved the latter best.

"Reginald is very dear to you?" she said, musingly, while her blue eyes wandered to the floor.

"More so than my own life!"

"And—does—he—love—you?"

"Oh, yes! But it was his pledge to you that drew him from me—he said it was nothing but that."

"And not love?"

"No, no; his love is mine. He has told me so."

"How can I believe that he would so deceive me?" The words were a question, put to self, and Cecilia was weighing what the other said.

"Indeed, it is true. Reginald Darnley loves me before all women, and honor, alone, to allegiance due you, robbed me of him."

"If you could prove this—"

"I can—I will," interrupted Orle, hopefully.

A point seemed decided in Cecilia's mind.

"Do it," she said; "prove what you say, and I will give him up." But, even as she promised, her faith in Reginald's constancy was great. She doubted if Orle could prove what she agreed.

"Oh! thank you. You have made me happy, do you know it? For I can and will prove that Reginald loves me, and then you'll give him up."

"Yes—I'll give him up," absently.

"Then listen. You must trust me; you must be guided entirely by me. I am going to leave Richmond to-night, and you must accompany me—"

"How? I cannot do that—my father—mother—"

"Allay their fears by a letter, which, I promise, they shall get before we go. Do not refuse me this. My whole future depends upon it."

"But where would you take me?"

"To Washington."

"To Washington!"

"Because Reginald leaves for Washington to-morrow morning."

"Ah!" interrupted Cecilia, thoughtfully; "the note I received said he was called away."

"I wrote that myself," exclaimed Orle. "That has nothing to do with it. When I penned the lines, I did not know that they were part truth. It was only a little while ago that I learned of his proposed departure, and his destination. Will you go?"

After a few moments' reflection, Cecilia acceded, though it was with hesitancy.

A sound of numerous footsteps on the stairs leading to the cellar, broke in upon their conversation, and Meg Semper, with Gerard Henricq and Nemil close at her heels, dashed upon the scene.

At sight of the hag Cecilia shrunk back, trembling. Orle pressed her hand tightly, and assured her that she had nothing to fear.

"By Satan!" screamed Meg, immediately, "they're after us. Quick, Orle Deice!—up-stairs and see who it is. There—hear 'em knocking. Will the girl go 'long with us?"

"Yes, Meg, she has consented—"

"Good enough, then. Now, away. Here, you"—to Cecilia—"put on this hat and shawl, and come."

She carried Cecilia's hat and shawl, and, handing these to their owner, she turned toward the basement entry.

"Fear nothing," said Henricq, as he took

her by the hand and led her after Meg Semper and the African.

Cecilia, with a fluttering heart, and bewildered, uneasy mind, followed him, while Orle hurried up-stairs to answer the summons at the front door.

The hag swung open the basement door, and darted out—into the grasp of a policeman.

She uttered a fierce oath, and clinched for a struggle.

Meg Semper was, in herself, a match for the man; and when the African, quickly joining her, lent his own powerful strength and ax-blows of his enormous fist, the officer reeled backward, blinded by his own blood, and sunk insensible to the sword.

The encounter was a brief one; so brief that Cecilia had not time to comprehend what it meant.

And, in a moment, Nemil's gruff voice said:

"Come."

Meg Semper had started forward, and was now some distance ahead.

Her hand still held by Gerard Henricq, Cecilia moved after the African; and the large, gloomily-silent house was soon out of sight in their rear.

CHAPTER XV.

JUST TOO LATE, CHRISTOPHER!

"Sweet Hope! celestial influence round me shed,
Waving thy silver pinions o'er my head."
—KEATS.

THE officer who had suffered at the hands of Meg Semper and the African, was, when our friend discovered him, just returning to consciousness.

His face was bloody, his clothes were torn, his hat was missing, and his head ached in consequence of the terrible blows Nemil had bestowed upon it.

Crewley knelt by his side and peered into his disfigured face, while the others clustered around him.

"I say," exclaimed the lawyer, "what's the matter?"

A low moan was the only reply he received.

"Poor fellow! He has been roughly handled," said Waldron, while Mr. Bernard looked on in wondering silence.

"Say, George, how'd you get in this fix?" inquired his brother officer, solicitously.

Another groan.

"Here—I guess you aren't quite dead yet, are you?" interrogated Crewley, bending lower to look into the pale, bloody countenance.

"I'm killed!" blurted the man, with a moan.

"He has been fatally injured in some way," spoke Lucy Bernard, in a sympathetic tone.

"Hold on," admonished the lawyer. "If you talk in that style, he'll think he's got his last sickness, and we'll have an opossum corpse on hand. Strikes me, he isn't within considerable of being done for, yet." Then to the man:

"I say, where are you hurt most?"

"I'm killed!" seemed to be the only reply he could make, and the words were half-choked.

"But, whereabouts, eh?"

"My head—it's split!"

"Nary split," declared Crewley, feeling the head, and soon pronouncing it in a solid condition.

"Isn't it cracked?" now venturing to open his eyes, and appearing hugely astonished.

"No, sir. Been stabbed?"

"I don't know," in a voice so dismal as to be ludicrous.

"Been shot?"

"I don't know."

"Um! Sum and substance of the whole: got your nose punched and laid down to die. You'll do; consider yourself engaged. Now, get up—jump! Who did this? How did you get mawled?"

Thus commanded, and partly convinced that he was not yet killed by half, the man essayed to gain his feet—aided by Crewley, who grasped him by the collar—and suc-

ceeded in standing before them, rocking unsteadily, and with features most woeful in expression.

After repeated questions, the story of his encounter, defeat and condition, was told. When the particulars were arrived at, Crewley turned to his companions and said, dryly: "Just in time to miss 'em! Hang it! Well, can't do anything more to-night—ha!"—a thought struck him—"Yes, we can, too! Come—shoot, you! Back to your house, Bernard. Leave this to me—yours forever, much. I've got the clue. Business. No time to waste. You're discharged." The last to the officers; and he added, to the one with the ill-used head: "Find a pump at the corner; better renovate your phiz a little."

"What now, Crewley?" asked Waldron. "What's to be done?"

"Leave it to me, I say. You and Bernard go home. I'll find her. Understand? Now then, no time to lose. I'm off." And he was.

Like a shadow, he silently, swiftly sped away across the adjoining lot, leaving them to wonder what plan had entered his fertile brain, and upon what he based his hopes of still being able to find and recover Cecilia.

The two policemen returned to their post at the station, where the man whom Nemil had punished created much sympathy by his sorrowful story, and the condoling support of his comrade in the night's adventure.

Bernard and Waldron hailed a cab.

The unhappy parent was for a long time silent, during the ride homeward, and Waldron, his own mind plunged in discouraging reflections, was silent as he.

But, Lacy Bernard was, evidently, thinking on else than his child, for he murmured, in a low voice, while his head sunk forward on his breast:

"Reginald, Reginald—and I thought you so true, upright, worthy of her love! How I was deceived in you!"

Waldron started from his reveries and looked at him.

"Did you speak, Mr. Bernard?"

"I was thinking of Reginald Darnley," replied Bernard, abstractedly.

"I have heard of him—son of the manufacturer, is he not? Report does not speak well of him."

"Ah! you know—"

"I know him to be a gambler," said Waldron, as his friend hesitated.

Bernard sighed.

"What is the matter, Mr. Bernard?"

"And, to think that I was so completely deceived in him," was the incomprehensive response.

"You knew him?" questioned Waldron.

Lacy Bernard glanced into the young man's face, then said, after a moment:

"Knew him?—yes. He was to have been my daughter's husband."

Waldron's heart gave a great thump. He repeated the words in a tremulous whisper. Then, like a flash, came thoughts of Cecilia's mysterious behavior in the forenoon of that day. Was this, then, the explanation? She was the betrothed of another when he had asked her hand. But, her father had said "was"—was to have been his daughter's husband. What had transpired since morning, to bring about the change? Had he given way to his own surmises and excited frame of mind as much as a second longer, calmness would have been impossible. But, he asked:

"Was Reginald Darnley engaged to be married to Cecilia?"

"Yes, they were to be wedded, soon."

"You say it was so. Is it not so now?"

"No, no; thank Heaven! my eyes are opened. Reginald Darnley is a gambler, a libertine, everything that would warrant my breaking off the engagement, and forbidding him my house."

Henry Waldron's heart was palpitating fast; his breath was short. So, this was the explanation; this was why Cecilia could not, would not pledge him her hand, even though she loved him. But, he asked another question:

"And when—when did you discover this of Reginald Darnley? When was the engagement between him and Cecilia annulled?"

"I learned all of him, early this afternoon. The intelligence came from his own father, and he also told me that, to preserve the family honor, he had disowned his son."

"Cecilia, then, is free?" eagerly.

"Yes, she is free."

"Does she—know—this of the man she was to marry?"

"No. Though, when she does, she would avoid him as a serpent."

"Yes, yes; she would. So pure a nature as hers would not tolerate so vile a presence—"

"Henry Waldron, you love her?"

"I do! Mr. Bernard, I worship the air she breathes! I can offer her a name as spotless as the fresh-fallen snow; I can bestow a heart unsullied by one drop of evil blood. In position, I am her equal; and, in the affection I entertain, I am sincere as I am worthy—"

"But, if she would only return your love—"

"She will; she does. From her own lips I know she would be mine, but for the engagement which you now tell me is broken. Dare I hope for your countenance? Will you encourage this? If Cecilia is free, will you aid me?"

Bernard grasped his arm in a warm hold.

"Find her—find her, Harry, and she is yours! I shall feel proud in seeing her your wife, for I know you are all that you have said. But, I fear that she is lost—lost! Where can she be?" and, with the conclusion of his speech, he relapsed again into the melancholy of despair.

"Have faith!" cried the young man, hopefully. "I have unlimited confidence in Mr. Crewley; and, evidently, he has some clue. Cecilia is not yet lost!"

"I will be resigned; I will wait. Heaven aid me!"

Christopher Crewley, after so abruptly leaving his friends, strode toward the depot. His object was apparent.

"I heard the rascal say," he muttered, "that he'd leave town to-night. Washington, D. C., eh? and Reginald Darnley—vagabond!—goes after him in the morning train, after poisoning his father. Dog! Guess my note will spoil that phase of the business. Wonder if the policeman delivered it in time—the note? That old villain was in the house, also dilapidated hag, also a big negro, also sparkling beauty whose impudence pretty nearly upset my equilibrium, also Cecilia Bernard—saw her distinctly. Crewley, you wretch! you're getting nervous—ha! will follow me, will you? Take that!" the last to a skeletoned canine which persistently dogged his footsteps, and which now skulked yelping away, having been treated to a forcible whack from the white umbrella.

Gaining the street, Crewley quickened his pace. Soon he came in sight of the depot, and a self-satisfied look rested upon his comically-grave face.

"Just in time—" but, even as he spoke, there sounded a shrill whistle, a clanging gong—the buzz and hum of many voices reached his ear, together with the deadened rumble of the departing cars.

A minute sooner, and he would have been in time. He stopped short before the entrance, and, in a vexed way, completed the interrupted sentence with:

"To miss 'em again!"

He at once retraced his steps, in no very good humor, facing for Lacy Bernard's house. Suddenly recollecting that he was a long way from the residence of that gentleman, he called a cab.

"That's she with them, I'm certain," he mused aloud, settling himself comfortably back in the cushions and placing the handle of the umbrella to his lips in a thoughtful way. "That the old villain has gone on that train, is likewise indisputable—according to the programme between him and Rex. Darnley. That I'm in a momentary fix, I take it for granted. Only momentary, though. Look out, rascals! I'm after you like lock-jaw. And my cow case comes off for final trial next week, too. Hope I'll be back in time. For I'm going after 'em, just as sure as perseverance can't be beat!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A BEAM OF LIGHT.

"I am giddy; expectation whirls me round."
—SHAKESPEARE.

"Should Disappointment, parent of Despair,
Strive for her son to seize my careless heart!"
—KEATS.

OUR friend, Christopher Crewley, stood in Wambole's well-known restaurant in E street, glancing carelessly over the many theater bills that hung promiscuously from the little screen near the door, and, occasionally, his restless gray eyes wandered about the long room, darting back to the entrance, and again to the programmes.

He was waiting and watching.

Being pretty well advised, through the conversation between Henricq and Darnley, which he had listened to at the saloon in Richmond, he had started immediately for Washington, and now awaited the appearance of the two, according to their engagement for that evening.

Reginald Darnley little suspected, when he seated himself in the car at the Richmond depot, that there were two steel-gray eyes watching him intently, marking his every movement with cat-like patience; and this surveillance was closely continued throughout the trip.

But, the lawyer had been thrown off the scent by a momentary relaxation in his vigil.

As the train wound around before the Capitol, he glanced from the window, to look up Pennsylvania avenue—the scene of former adventures vividly impressed upon his memory. When he turned again to where Reginald had been sitting, the latter had disappeared.

A day was spent in wandering about town, hoping that chance would enable him to spot the young man, but without success. He knew, however, that the old villain would meet his dupe on that night, at the restaurant aforementioned.

The peculiar "rig" of the lawyer attracted attention and excited remark—particularly with a well-known party—Captain Oscar—whose handsome face, flashy attire and good-humored wit made him notorious there.

The hands of the clock indicated ten minutes to eight.

Crewley had drank twice at the bar—lemonade—and was beginning to grow uneasy.

"Hang it!" he muttered. "Washington seems to be a vexatious place for me, anyhow. Only last winter, I had my patience well nigh poisoned—ah—" a footstep sounded in the doorway, and some one entered.

It was Gerard Henricq.

The appearance of the old man relieved Crewley considerably. He followed him, covertly, with his eyes, and his lips screwed themselves into a series of puckers, while the white umbrella was more snugly tightened under his arm.

Henricq advanced to the bar, called for a light drink, then retired toward the cigar-stand.

He had not long to wait. Reginald Darnley fulfilled his engagement promptly. The two held a whispered conversation of several seconds, and then went out.

"Two rascals, if such ever lived!" exclaimed the lawyer, nodding his head after them as he followed close upon their heels.

"Somethin's up," whispered one of the loiterers near the bar; for Crewley's significant movements had been noticed.

"Detective," said Oscar, briefly, and a wise look settled on his face, as he smoothed his fierce mustache.

It was a cloudy night, and through the uncertain gloom Christopher Crewley pursued the shadowy figures.

Along E street; up Ninth; down H—suddenly, they vanished. But a pair of sharp eyes marked the house where they entered, and the lawyer, with an exclamation of satisfaction, retraced his steps in the direction of the office of the W. U. Telegraph Company.

"Told Waldron I'd send after him. Now's the time. Got 'em boxed, sure, hum! So—so, my plotters, I'll soon put a spider in your dumpling, or my name isn't Chris Crewley!"

Lacy Bernard and Henry Waldron had bid the lawyer "God speed" when the latter in-

formed them of the clue he possessed, and then resigned themselves to patience.

Both had faith in Crewley, and Crewley was confident.

Mrs. Bernard ceased to weep, and joined her hopes with theirs, for the safe return of Cecilia.

It was near noon of the day upon which Christopher Crewley started on the trail, when a note, addressed to Lacy Bernard, was delivered at the house.

The chirography in which it was directed, was an unfamiliar one, and the anxious father hastened to peruse its contents.

Waldron—who had remained at his friend's house since the evening of Cecilia's mysterious disappearance—drew near, eagerly expecting some tidings of his loved one.

The lines ran as follows:

"LACY BERNARD:—At your daughter's request I write to inform you of her safety. Strange events have called her suddenly from you, but the emergencies, though severe, portend for her no danger. She will return to her home shortly, and relieve your mind of that painful anxiety which must be incident to her unexplained absence. Again let me assure you of her safety and health.

"A FRIEND."

A deep silence reigned in the room after reading the letter, and lover and father gazed inquiringly at each other.

"But where can she be?" fell, half involuntarily, from Waldron's lips.

"God only can tell us!" replied Bernard, dejectedly. "Oh, what is this feeling that fastens upon me, and tells me that she is in danger? for I cannot believe this note; I cannot believe that she is safe. This is not sufficient to relieve the torn heart of a parent. It does not tell us where she is—only assures us of her safety; leaves us in doubt as to its truth. If free as well as safe, why did not she pen the lines? I believe I wish—yes, I do wish it had not come at all. It worries me more than ever."

"Let us accept it as a good omen—" began the young man, perceiving that his friend was rapidly sinking to utter despair. But the old gentleman interrupted him with:

"No, sir; it is otherwise. I believe its sole purpose is to deceive us, and stay our pursuit. Don't you see?—they who have her in their power, would deceive us to thinking she will return, and thus gain a greater advantage by our inaction!"

"What are we to do then?" Waldron regretted his speech as soon as uttered, for he saw that it augmented the other's suffering.

"I know not! I know not!" groaned Bernard, dashing his hands to his brow, and bowing his grief-weighted head. "It would seem that fate mocks us. We are helpless. She must suffer while we wait."

"And it may not be for long," Waldron said, encouragingly. "We have an active agent at work. I know Mr. Crewley; he is as shrewd as any detective that ever lived. Our case could not be in better hands—"

"Have faith in God!" chimed in a mild voice behind them.

Mrs. Bernard had joined them unobserved; and the sentence she uttered was, truly, the whisper of a comforter.

She had mastered the weakness of despair, and now set them the bright example of hope.

When they showed her the letter, she shook her head sadly.

"Build nothing on that," she said; "it is a false beacon. Our only strength is in resignation."

Wearily the day dragged on; and as dreary was the night to those who mourned the absence of a loved one.

Another day came, but, with it, no new light to break the shade of melancholy.

Lacy Bernard paced the parlor throughout the whole morning, seeming to have given way completely to his woe. Even Waldron found it difficult to quiet his unstrung nerves and harassed mind, and continue his speeches of encouragement and condolence.

Thursday evening set in; slowly the hours marched on.

"We don't hear from Crewley!" moaned Bernard, despondingly, as he and the young man sat alone in the dimly-lighted parlor.

"I have not yet despaired, Mr. Bernard. Wait a little longer."

"A little longer! A little longer!" repeated the old gentleman in tremulous accents. "How much longer? Days are passing. This suspense is eating at my life! I shall sink under it. I cannot bear up!"

A ring at the door-bell broke in upon his sentence, and he paused.

Both started. There was something in the sudden sound which caused them an unspeakable thrill.

Like statues they sat; holding their breaths, they listened.

"A telegram, sir."

Henry Waldron bounded forward and snatched the missive from the servant's hand; with trembling fingers he tore open the envelope.

In another second, he uttered a glad cry.

"Found! Come on! Washington! Meet you at Willard's. CREWLEY."

So read the dispatch and two hearts throbbed in joy.

"Thank God!" ascended simultaneously from those who had received the glad intelligence.

CHAPTER XVII.

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

"Fancy from comfort wanders still astray."
—BEATTIE.

"Hell hath no greater torments for the accurs'd
Than this man's presence gives."—BAILLIE.

In a secluded section—near the canal—Gerard Henricq had secured a house for his party, upon their arrival in Washington.

Cecilia Bernard accompanied them, though her heart was not altogether freed of a feeling of distrust. But, something in the manner of Orle Deice had persuaded her to the course—something subtle, beyond the mere solicitation of the beauty that she might be allowed to prove Reginald's inconstancy.

Orle had joined them a day later. The note with assurance of Cecilia's safety had been dispatched, she said, and the young girl's mind was made easier on that point.

"I wish I had written it myself," Cecilia said thoughtfully, as she and Orle sat alone in the upper story of the weird house.

"It will not matter," returned the beauty. "It is sufficient for them to know that you are safe—and the note will, undoubtedly, fix that."

"Did you tell them where I had gone?"

"Oh, no; for, if I had, they would follow us without delay. And in such a case, I might not have time to prove what I desire."

"When will you prove what you promised?—when can I return to my home?"

"Both, very shortly. But, come—you are not so very uncomfortable with us?"

"No. I feel that you strive to make it cheerful for me. Yet—"

"What is it?"

"That fiend woman," whispered Cecilia, glancing about her with a shudder; "I fear her. She is ugly and fierce, and I know, wishes me no good. I see but little of her; though, when she does come near me, her eyes gleam wickedly—"

"She will offer you no harm," said Orle, compressing her lips. "I have arranged matters so that she will not dare to offer you an injury. And even if she did offer to molest you, I have given you that with which to defend yourself."

"But, why should she wish me ill, at all? I never wronged her."

"It is the keeping of a terrible oath—a vow to exterminate all who are named Darnley, and who know a favor at the hands of a Darnley. It was a pledge given at the side of a death-bed."

A cold shiver crept over Cecilia.

"This terrible vow would have been carried out long ago," continued Orle, "had it not been for a talisman given me by the dying woman—"

"It was a woman?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

Orle Deice hesitated for a second; then, lowering her voice, she answered:

"Reginald Darnley's own mother!"

Cecilia was struck dumb.

"Yes, his own mother. Were you living in Richmond at the time—but, no; you were hardly born when Mervin Darnley and his Creole wife separated. Did you ever hear

your father or mother speak of that separation?"

"I—I think I have."

"This 'fiend woman,' as you call her, is the mother of Mervin Darnley's former wife, so, you may judge what that wife was, coming of such blood. At the time when the Creole married Mervin Darnley, her mother, this woman—Margaret Semper by name, was a hired woman, in a rich widow's family, in New Orleans, though, of course, the fact was kept from Mervin Darnley. She made herself so valuable, that the widow, in her will, bequeathed an immense sum of money to her. Margaret Semper, to get the money sooner, poisoned this widow! Going from New Orleans to Richmond, she there met the discarded wife, and having once stricken out a life, her heartless bosom was steeled for anything; she immediately urged the wreaking of a terrible vengeance, and her daughter, having in her much of the mother's devilish spirit, consented to the terrible plot I've mentioned."

"Go on," urged Cecilia, whisperingly, completely wrapt in the strange detail. "Tell me more. How did you learn all this? You said something of a talisman? Tell me who you are?"

"Tell you who I am?" repeated the beauty, in tones that were slow and sad, while her head, with its rich mass of jetty hair, drooped forward on her bosom.

"Yes, tell me this, for I—"

"Hush!" interrupted Orle. "Some one is coming."

Nemil entered the room.

"The cab is at the door," he said, in his brief, guttural voice.

"But, I told you to order a barouche—"

"'Tis the same," he broke in, with a snap.

"What you want, is here," and he turned abruptly away.

"No more just now," Orle said to her companion. "I'll answer those questions when I come back. I'm going out for a ride; and I'd have you go with me, only I think it inadvisable that you should be seen on the streets. Strive to be content with your brief imprisonment, and all will soon be well."

Reginald Darnley had engaged rooms on H street, near —; or, rather, Gerard Henricq had secured them for him.

Already had remorse begun its tortures. He bitterly repented his rash course—repented as it is only possible to repent when too late; and more than once in the privacy of his apartments, had he cursed the fate which led Gerard Henricq across his path.

Bending under the dreadful weight of a murderer's conscience, he could not sleep at night; the day was void of pleasure; his once handsome face had grown pale and haggard, until, in the altered features, there was scarce a vestige of his former self.

It was in the morning after Reginald's arrival in Washington when Gerard Henricq paid a call.

"Ah! Mr. Darnley, how do you do, today? I have news for you—" that same soft, engaging voice which had tempted Reginald to his spiritual ruin.

"News, Gerard Henricq? No—there's nothing to interest me, that I know of. I care very little for what happens about me."

"Tut! Tut! Come, you must be more cheerful. Why, you are wasting yourself away in idle broodings. You must wake up and take an interest in everything you see. Be alive. Be cheerful, I say."

"Cheerful"—in a bitter tone—"you mock me. Would that I could be! Do you realize what I am?—a murderer! Heavens! what an accursed existence! But, you have news—what is it?"

The old villain drew from his pocket a copy of a morning daily, and, indicating an item in the "Telegraph News," read aloud:

"RICHMOND, June, —, 1871.—Much excitement has been created in this city, by the sudden death of a Mr. Darnley, well known as one of our wealthy, retired manufacturers. The circumstances in connection with his decease are mysterious and suspicious; but, a *post mortem* examination has revealed nothing, and the verdict of the jury is one of doubt—"

"There! There!" cried the young man;

"read no more. Spare me. At every turn, the horror of my crime is blazoned before me!—every hour brings something to confront me with the heinousness of my guilt!—the very airs whisper of retribution in store! And you, Gerard Henricq—wily, cunning serpent that you are!—why do you join in the host of burning reminders that make me so miserably wretched? Why have you made me what I am?—for it was you." He concluded this speech with a searching warmth, as if he had just begun to question the cause of Henricq's interest in him and his actions.

"Cease, cease, Mr. Darnley; all I have done or urged was for your sole benefit."

"How much am I bettered by following your Satanic advice?" sarcastically.

"A hundred thousand or so—perhaps more," was the significant response.

"You must have had some subtle purpose to serve, in driving me to this," Reginald said, bending a thoughtful gaze upon the other's face.

"How could I accrue anything?" this with a deprecatory motion of the hands, and a solemn gravity of countenance; and he pursued:

"I met you, a stranger—you were beggared and hopeless. Through me, your fortunes have changed. You will gain possession of a goodly sum by the death of your father. If, but for me, would you have thought—"

"Stop! God! There it is again. Always, always something to remind me."

"You are returning me poor thanks for my efforts in your behalf," continued Henricq. "But, come, you must throw aside this enervating garb. Why, you'd confine yourself to these rooms until it proved your death! Let's walk out. You need air."

"And better death than life like this! Oh! were I not a coward—my own hand should rid me of this curseful ban!"

Henricq paid little attention to this. It was not the first outburst he had witnessed, even in the short period since Reginald joined him.

On the street, they sauntered leisurely along; but, while the old man evinced a lively interest in noting the buildings, pedestrians, etc., Reginald's head hung in random meditation, and he seemed to care little for what occurred in his surrounding.

It was when they neared the fine smooth drive on Pennsylvania avenue, that something attracted the young man's attention—as it did that of many who were engaged in watching the flash liveries and handsome equipages which enlivened the drive. The day was a beautiful one, and fashion sought an early commune with the smiles of nature.

A barouche, with gayly-caparisoned horses and fancifully-attired driver, was dashing past, and its occupant, a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, was gazing steadily at Gerard Henricq and Reginald Darnley.

"Stop! Stop!" she suddenly cried, to the driver; and the mettlesome steeds were brought standing upon their hinder feet by the quick check of the rein which followed the command.

At sound of her voice, at sight of her face, Reginald turned abruptly and fled up Ninth street.

"Herwin, come here," continued the occupant of the barouche to Gerard Henricq, who was looking up the street after Reginald.

"Well, Orle, what will you have?" he asked, going to her.

"When I asked you of Reginald Darnley last night, you said you knew nothing of his whereabouts."

"I did," he replied, with an uneasy movement.

"I doubted the truth of your answer then, for I reasoned that if you had taken pains to learn of his departure, and would follow him, you would also keep close watch upon him. You told me a falsehood. You have deceived me. Chance favors me; for here I find you walking arm in arm with him. Now, tell me where he lives—and speak the truth."

"Orle, why will you keep this up? Let him go—"

"Answer me. Must I force you?"

"Force me?"

"Ay; would you have me send you forever from my sight? Would you have me vow

that you shall never hear another word of address from my lips? And this I will do!—even my occasional company shall be denied you."

Orle Deice was making use of a subtle power. She knew that the man before her loved her to madness. This threat startled him.

"Tell me," she said, after a pause, "where does Reginald Darnley live?"

The desired information was given, and, without deigning to thank him, she drove off.

"After all," he muttered, scowling, as he started from the spot, "even if she does see him, he may send her away in contempt. The secret will be out; she will be astounded, will profess no knowledge of the letter, and, perhaps, in a feeling of injured innocence, her love for him will cool. He will not believe her denials; he will turn his back upon her. How I hate him—more and more, whenever I hear her speak his name. I almost incline to assist Meg Semper in an opportunity to strike at his heart without waiting longer! It would rid me of a formidable rival. Aha! how I have tormented him. My revenge is growing sweet, indeed! Silly fool! Had he but looked at the paper, he would have seen that it contained no such notice. Only a trick of mine, to make him writhe the more. Hal h—ah! how sweet is revenge! My cheek is beginning to smart less. Soon the wound will heal, when I shall strike the final blow."

As the characters in this scene disappeared, a man who had been leaning against a tree on the corner whirled about and gazed after the barouche.

He had been a sly listener and witness to all that passed.

This party raised the handle of a white umbrella to his lips and mused, aloud:

"That's the same black-eyed vixen I saw at the house in Richmond. Now, what the deuce is she doing here? So she's well acquainted with that old villain. What a nest of 'em I'm unearthing. A regularly-organized ring, it seems, of genteel, aristocratic rascals—male and female. By George! where does she live? I must know that, and then I'll have 'em all netted."

As this latter thought struck him, he lingered not another second, but sped away in pursuit.

He pulled his hat tighter on his head, and clutched his umbrella with a firm grip. He could not help recalling to mind a former race after a barouche, and the incidents connected with it.

"Now, if this one serves me as that one did," he resolved mentally, "I'll give in, and never chase another vehicle as long as I live—don't care who's in it."

The barouche proceeded leisurely along, and when Crewley gained a position abreast of it, he experienced no difficulty in the chase.

The hat slid to the back of his head, to let more air play upon his temples, and he kept a bandanna handkerchief whisking spasmodically around his throat and over his face.

"That's more like it," he exclaimed, when he found it an easy matter to keep pace with the object of his pursuit. "Dreadful warm, though—hot!"

In front of the Kirkwood House, at Twelfth street, he met Waldron.

"Where to, Crewley?" asked the young man, detaining him.

"See that barouche, there?" was the interrogative reply, pointing out to the street.

"Yes—"

"Well, I'm after it. Look at her good. Know her? Ever see her before, eh?"

"The same girl we saw at the large house in Richmond," said Waldron slowly, as he caught a momentary glimpse of the beautiful face.

"Exactly. She's one of 'em."

"One of who?"

"The gang—there, don't stop me; she'll get away. I want to cage her, too, when we grab 'em. Looks like a fascinating siren—a receiver of stolen goods, perhaps; a head center; queen of thieves, etc., etc. Go back to the hotel. See you to-night."

And he started off at a rapid gait, to make up for lost time.

Henry Waldron gazed wonderingly after

the lawyer, until the latter's fluttering duster was no longer visible in the throng, and then he entered the Kirkwood.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPIDER ON THE WALL.

"Bear firmly; yet a few more days
And thy hard trial will be past."

—ANDREW NORTON.

AFTER the departure of Orle Deice, Cecilia fell to thinking.

Impressed with the awe of solitude, and the naturally strange feelings of one abruptly taken from home and friends, to be surrounded by mysterious company—for those with whom she was thus thrown, were, to her, mysterious; and the more so, owing to the brief revelation Orle had made—her mind, confused by the excitement of her situation, wandered in shadowy channels which left her surmising, questioning, doubting.

Thus she sat, when Orle had left her; her attitude one of deepest reverie, and her gaze resting vacantly on the sunrays that played through the half-open window on the figured carpet.

The house was on Seventeenth street, and, as we have stated, near the canal. Beyond the tow-path shone the silvery waters of the Potomac, whose marshes were waving in the gentle breeze, like an overgrown woodland of the Naiads; and among the green trees that lined the shore, birds were reveling in the gaiety of song.

To Cecilia's meditations wafted many a glad carol or murmuring whir, and cool airs winged across the trembling bosom of the river, fanned and played with her wealth of golden tresses.

Over the scenes of the past few days, back to those loved ones in Richmond, who, notwithstanding all assurance, must long, heart-aching, for her return; to Reginald Darnley; to Henry Waldron; and the weird something that was to decide her choice in love; to the beautiful girl through whose solicitation she was there, and the singular story she had half told—at random, fancy flew, and the moments lapsed unheeded at lightning speed.

Suddenly she uttered a cry of horror.

At her feet, in the sunlight, was a monstrous spider—its horrible little eyes fairly snapping fire. It was an ugly thing; a large body of brownish color—like a tiny, inflated bug—and head of bristled gray. Its numerous legs projected above the back, elbowing thence to the floor.

It began to move toward her.

Powerless to move—as if riveted by some irresistible magnetism; speechless, her gaze fixed upon it, she drew back till she leaned against the window-frame, and her features overspread with an ashen hue.

It advanced; its two sharp pincer-claws struck rapidly together, as if in anticipation of a bloody feast; it crawled upon her slipper, then on to her dress; presently, it rose above her knee, and, pausing there for a moment, its body puffed out larger, and the poisonous mouth opened viciously.

Cecilia scarcely breathed. Chained in a dread spell, her heart stood still.

The spider moved again. Slowly, slowly upward; then it was upon her shoulder. The flesh of the neck shrunk as that cold, clammy, dragging object was felt upon it; yet, she had no strength, she could not strike off the fearful monster.

But, it continued to climb. Up, up—then it was upon her head. Wonderful preservation!—it had left her, and was now crawling up the window-frame.

The spell was broken. With a shriek she bounded from her seat, and, in the same instant the door opened and Meg Semper entered.

Even the presence of the hag was a relief, after passing such an ordeal, and Cecilia ran to her, grasping her by the arm.

Meg, not understanding the movement, tore the other's hands from their hold, and, with a jerk and a push, sent her reeling across the apartment.

"Devils a loose!" she cried, shrilly; "what's the matter with you? What do you catch hold of me that way for, eh? Are you going crazy? Do you want to tear me to pieces? I think you'd like to scratch my eyes out. Take care!—I do not think too much of you

yet, my pretty lady. It's a favor that I haven't choked you since we came here—and I might do it now if I wanted to; it's a good chance. Take care how you grab me that way again—you scratch-cat!—or you'll find out what I am."

"I know well enough what you are," Cecilia said with a shudder, as she retired to a further part of the room.

"And what am I, eh?" demanded Meg Semper, with a harsh snap in her cracked voice, and advancing toward the girl.

"Keep off!" commanded Cecilia, sternly, returning the fiery gaze of the hag with an unwavering glance.

"But you said you knew what I was. Now, what am I, eh?"

"I tell you to keep off. Leave this room—"

"Oho! how long since you've been mistress here? Now I know you're crazy!" still advancing, step by step, in a menacing way.

"You had best keep away from me, Meg Semper."

"You'd better answer me!" hissed Meg, slowly producing her murderous knife, while her eyes glittered threateningly.

But the way Cecilia met this surprised the hag. From the bosom of her dress she, too, drew forth a sharp, glistening blade of steel, and, while the look of some deep resolve settled on her face, she took a quick step toward her persecutor.

Unprepared for this, Meg Semper retreated. Cecilia smiled sarcastically. She concluded from this that the hag was a coward.

"Come, what's this? Are you at the girl again?"

It was Nemil who uttered the growling words, and, turning to the African who stood in the doorway, Meg screamed:

"See, Nemil! she's got a knife!"

"Then, let her keep it. She'll hurt nobody without a cause."

"But, where'd she get it, eh? Where? Look!"

"No matter. Let her keep it—and do you remain away from its point, and cease your torments, or I'll stand guard over her, and w-r-i-n-g your n-e-c-k every time you come too near."

"By Satan! you're her champion—you'll fight me, too!"

"Rest your tongue—it makes my ears sore—"

"But we must take the knife away from her!" persisted Meg.

"I tell you, no; and I say, leave off. Rat-ta-ta-chit-er-rit-arit, like a furnace-hammer, until I tire with hearing you talk so much. Put a stick in your lips, and die, if you won't cease without. What brought you here?"

"I came to see if she wanted some lunch—"

"And began with the threat of a knife? Bah!—go now!"

And the black face wore an expression of contempt.

"Do you want dinner?" addressing Cecilia briefly.

"You may bring me a light lunch, if you will," she answered.

He vented a grunt, and followed Meg Semper, who was moving sullenly away.

As the hag passed the door, a small, dark object fell from the ceiling and struck upon her head. She jumped back, uttered a startled cry, that was half one of pain, then stamped something beneath her feet.

"Well, and what's the matter now?" demanded Nemil, colliding with her. "By the tail of the devil! you're always screeching like a hurt cat—and I tell you, I tire of it."

"Nasty thing! It bit me!"

"What?"

"A spider! It bit me on the head. There!"—with a final stamp—"it won't bite again, I guess. My head aches already—"

"Hunh!—go on."

As soon as they were gone, Cecilia restored her knife to its sheath.

"To think that I should ever have to handle such a weapon!" she murmured. "Orle Deice was not wrong when she forced it upon me and told me I might find it a welcome ally in her absence. How I tremble before that terrible hag! And how she seems to hate me! Ah! yes, Orle was telling me

why, before she went out. I will learn more of her when she comes back. What a cloud of mystery seems floating around me!"

While partaking of a tempting lunch which Nemil brought, Orle returned.

"I'll join you in the meal," she said, pleasantly, seating herself at the table. "My barouche is at the door, and I must be off again at once."

"This is unexpected, is it not?"

"Yes. But I may not be gone over a couple of hours. When I come back, I want to talk with you."

"You will finish the narrative you began this morning?"

"Yes. Were you disturbed at all while I was away?"

"A great deal," answered Cecilia, promptly. "That fearful woman came here and tried to make me miserable by threats and menaces. But for the weapon you gave me, I fear I might have suffered much at her hands."

Orle frowned, and the dark eyes sparkled with angry thought.

"She threatened you?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I really cannot imagine. I'm sure I offered no encouragement to her approach."

"I'll speak to Nemil. He'll see to it that she does not come near you again," Orle said, decidedly.

Shortly arising from her seat, the beauty bantered:

"A bracelet of gold that you cannot guess where I am going."

"Where?"

"To see Reginald Darnley."

Cecilia started.

"I'll fix it so he shall come here to-night," added she; "then you shall see if I have not told you the truth regarding his love."

With a further assurance that Meg Semper should not again annoy her, she left her.

As she walked away from Cecilia's room, Meg Semper came out of a closet on the opposite side of the hall, and looked after her.

"Fix it so that he shall come here to-night!" she muttered, using Orle's words to Cecilia. "And if he does come—now, may Satan seize me if I don't sink my knife in his heart! I'll do't before he can get to her, and before the cursed Talisman can stay me! I will! So, she gave the knife to the girl, eh? Now, Orle Deice, beware!—don't fool with Meg Semper; for, if you do, though I swore to stay by you and never offer you harm, I'll kill you, too! I will!" and she shook her fist savagely at the retreating form of the beauty.

Then, as she moved along the entry, she pressed her claw-like hands to her temples, and continued, in muttering strain:

"My head!—my head! It aches—it aches! Devil eat that spider! Its bite was poisonous, I fear!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A WOMAN'S ARMS.

"Peace is the atmosphere I breathe,
And my calm mind goes to her dewy bower."
—TUPPER.

REGINALD wished to avoid meeting Orle Deice. Satisfied, as he was, that she was the sole cause of all his troubles, and that, but for her, he would not now be weighed down by the dreadful gloom of a murderer's life, he hated sight of her—hated thoughts of her.

When he fled so abruptly—as if pursued by a goblin whose presence chilled the veins and balked the senses—he hoped to escape her entirely, and it was with a feeling of intense satisfaction he looked back and ascertained that she was not in pursuit of him.

Half forgetting Gerard Henricq—in fact, careless as to that party's movements, he returned straightway to his rooms and locked himself in.

Solitude had many fascinations for him—he could think, could brood upon the miseries of fate, with pictures and characters of his mind's creation to surround him; and melancholy musings oft stilled the unrest of his conscience with an indescribable influence.

The day wore on.

Early in the afternoon, a servant knocked at his door, and informed him that a visitor was in the parlor.

"Man or woman?" he asked, gloomily, thinking at the same time it might be Orle Deice or Gerard Henricq.

"Woman, sir," was the servant's reply.

Reginald started,

"Is there no name?—did you not bring a card?"

"No, sir."

"Can you describe her?" frowning darkly.

"A rather slender woman, sir, dressed in black—with very bright eyes and a handsome face."

"It is she!" interrupted the young man, and he fell to musing. "By Heaven, she must have tracked me, after all. She followed me, else how discover my residence? What to do?—have her sent away? Ay, but would she go? No—it is useless to deny her; she is spirited, and will persist until the people of the house begin to wonder. Fate—fate—why is this being brought up again upon my path? I had hoped that we were parted forever—"

"What shall I tell her?" inquired the servant, who waited patiently in the doorway.

"Admit her."

Orle Deice was ushered in.

Her beauty of face and form seemed even greater at this moment. The lustrous eyes sparkled doubly bright! the full lips, like half-open rosebuds, were moist in their dewy sweetness; her raven tresses were superbly arranged with jeweled pins; and, combining her costly and magnificent attire of gauzes, laces and illusions, the picture was of a new-born goddess, whose advent was heralded by breaths of dreamy perfume.

"Reginald!"

She smiled and extended her dimpled hands.

"Well, Orle—you here?" was the cold rejoinder, turning from her as he spoke.

"Yes, I have found you. But I had a hard hunt."

"I would it had been longer and less successful." Colder still.

She looked at him in wonderment.

"Is this your greeting, Reginald?"

"I have none other to offer. Why are you here?"

"Why am I here? What a question! Why, to see you."

The bright beauty of her face was losing color, and her voice faltered.

"And now that you do see me, have I altered much since we last met? I look ill, do I not? Well, I am. But you see me, and I beg you to depart. You can have nothing to keep you here."

"Why, how strangely you talk! You are not yourself."

"Strange? True, I am not myself. Please begone, your presence is distasteful."

And he seated himself near a window, carelessly turning over the leaves a novel.

Orle contemplated him in astonishment. Was this the man she loved so deeply—the one who oft had whispered of an enduring affection, placed his heart where her own could feel its beating, snatched kisses in myriad from the lips she willingly yielded up to him? Could this be Reginald Darnley, whom she so idolized and whose warm ardor had vied with her own in vowing castled love? What meant this change? Why this distant bearing toward her?

"Reginald—what—what does this mean?"

The large, black eyes were opened wide, and the music of her voice was tremulous.

He closed the book, and slowly raised his gaze to hers.

"Orle Deice, will you leave me? You have already wrecked my life; why add to the gall by your presence? Go!"

Her bosom heaved; something was cutting at her heart.

"Reginald!" she said, in a tremored whisper; "what do you mean?"

"Mean?"—starting to his feet—"I mean that I do not wish you near me. You are no less than a beautiful fiend, Orle Deice! You have ruined me! You have deceived me! You have destroyed every golden faith I once placed in your professions of love! And if you will but think, you will see how you have wrought this. It is needless for me to tell you."

"No, no, no—there is a mistake; there is something wrong, some cruel misunderstanding! Reginald, you are stabbing me! Each word you speak, is a knife-thrust at my bosom! Ruined you? Deceived you?—never! In Heaven's name! explain."

She hurried to his side, as she concluded this brief, passionate outburst, and would have thrown her arms around his neck.

But he cast her off.

"Orle Deice, let me ask you what you mean by this hypocrisy? Dare you hope that there is one particle even of friendship for you in my breast, after what you have done?"

"Reginald, as Heaven is my witness, I have done nothing!" she cried, passionately. "Oh! tell me—tell me of what I am accused!"

His brow became stern; his eyes seemed lighting with their old brilliancy, and his lip quivered. A strange feeling crept over him as she made that declaration.

"Done nothing?" he repeated; then grasping her by the wrist, in a hold that was painful, he hissed:

"I once borrowed a sum of money from you."

"Yes," in a panting accent, while she trembled beneath his fierce glance.

"You said I need never return it, if I did not choose."

"Yes, yes; and I meant it, Reginald."

"Meant it! Did you not send a negro to my father's house, a few days ago, with a note bearing your signature?—and, in that note did you not demand payment of the money—"

"Reginald!" she gasped, interrupting him; "as I hope for peace in death—no, I did not!"

Reginald staggered from her, and clutched a chair for support.

"You did not do this?"

"Never! Do you believe me?" And now the arms that stole about his neck remained there.

For some time the young man's mind was in a giddy whirl. A strange noise seemed ringing in his ears; the lovely face that looked up to his, was but dimly seen.

"Can—can it be, I have so wrongly judged you?" he uttered, chokingly.

"You have, Reginald!—you have!" clinging tighter to him. "Tell me, now, what has happened. Let us clear away this terrible mystery."

When he had calmed himself, he told her all. Orle was dumb in amazement. She knew nothing of the letter, and—oh! a sudden light flashed upon her; she guessed the source of all the trouble. But she did not impart this guess to Reginald.

Then she appeared to be thinking upon what he had said. When he spoke of poisoning his father, a shudder convulsed her frame; but she did not stir—her thoughts were fastened upon that very subject. Something perplexed her.

"Reginald, you say you tried to poison him, on Tuesday night?"

"Sh! not so loud, Orle. Yes—I did not only try, but I did poison him!" glancing nervously around the room, as if fearful lest some eavesdropper should hear the dread confession.

"And have you heard anything of it since?" still in that thoughtful way.

"Yes. To-day in one of the city papers, a telegram from Richmond spoke of it."

"Yet I saw him on Wednesday afternoon, before I left Richmond, walking the street."

Reginald's eyes were starting; his features whitened; he cried, in a hoarse whisper:

"You saw him, Orle?—you saw him on Wednesday afternoon? At what time?"

"It must have been nearly five o'clock. I was on my way to the depot."

"And he looked well?"

The young man gasped forth his inquiry with a wild eagerness.

He remembered that Gerard Henricq had promised the death of Mervin Darnley, within ten hours after drinking the poison. If Orle had seen the manufacturer at five o'clock on Wednesday, then the diabolical plot must have failed. In his state of acute remorse, this hope was joy-imparting. A new warmth welled in his breast.

"Are you sure?" he questioned eagerly—"are you sure you could not have been mistaken?"

"Quite sure, Reginald; for I know your father well at sight."

When Orle Deice left him, he was an altered man. His form resumed the old carriage of confidence; a flush was on his cheek; in his face was an expression completely banishing the dejected look which had settled there in the few days past.

Her visit had served to drive away the somber clouds of despair, and leave him happy in the belief that a kind Providence had intervened in some way to save him. Something told him he was innocent of the crime he had attempted.

His brow was clear; his mind composed, as he walked to and fro; and suddenly he exclaimed, with vehemence:

"Now, Gerard Henricq—now get from my sight! No longer your slave, to be tortured and played with as you will, but once more a Darnley! And Orle—generous girl—made me promise to draw on her for funds. We shall soon bid adieu to these dark scenes, and seek bliss amid the sunlight of a foreign clime. For I love her best!—I love her best! I love Cecilia, too; but it is not such a love as that I bear Orle, and I would be sinning if I married her in those feelings. And I know she would be my wife, despite her father, if I asked it. Orle! Orle!—But I am thinking too fast. I shall see her to-night; she has given me her direction. Oh! once again those pleasant moments—how eager I am to welcome them! And why should I not be? Not a murderer!—ha! ha! ha!—but a man!—a man! Ah! my brain—how it whirls around!"

CHAPTER XX.

IN FOR IT!

"Curiosity! thy netting power
Oft leads where reason should compel us
back." —ANON.

CHRISTOPHER CREWLEY'S pursuit of the barouche was unobserved by Orle Deice.

The driver turned his horses in at the Fifteenth street gate to the Treasury Building, and continued leisurely on, past the grounds of the White House, finally emerging on Seventeenth street—Crewley, like a hound on scent, keeping close upon the "game" he had spotted.

The barouche turned to the left, toward the canal.

The lawyer opened his eyes wider, and wondered as he followed.

"Now, where the dogs is she leading me to? Wonder if she knows I'm on her heels and means to spring a trap on me? If so, then hang me if there isn't a broken head or two, before I get out of pickle!" and the way in which he grasped his umbrella plainly told that he meant business.

Slowly onward went the barouche. Presently it stopped before a three-story brick dwelling, whose crumbling exterior savored strongly of discomfort.

Crewley raised his umbrella—for the sun had fierce play upon his head in this vicinity—and, halting, composedly struck a position against a near telegraph-pole.

"Got you boxed, too!" he soliloquized, as Orle alighted and entered the house. "I'd squeal—you little vixen!—if I could learn just exactly who and what you are, and how the deuce you came to be mixed up in this little divertissement. Your party's meanderings have brought me all the way from Richmond by telegraph!—they have! And you can build a palace on my word for't, I'm going to have satisfaction. Satisfaction—understand?" and he nodded his head toward the residence, as if the subject of his remarks was listening attentively to his spoken musings.

With one leg crossed, a shoulder braced against the telegraph-pole, hat on the extreme back of his head, eyes straining, and tongue in one side of his mouth, he kept close watch from beneath the edge of his umbrella.

He had not long to wait. Orle Deice soon reappeared, and was driven off.

He seemed hesitating as to whether he should continue to follow her. Then he shook his head, and exclaimed, while he wiped the perspiration from his brow:

"No, sir—too hot!"

He was about to move away, when an idea seemed to enter his eccentric brain.

Immediately turning, he walked leisurely past the house, glancing covertly up at the windows.

"Wonder if she lives there by herself, eh? All the windows shut—um!" another idea.

He had passed the house, and, looking down along its side, saw a gate open. In a few seconds he was at the gate, and looking in. Then he glanced about him. No one was in sight.

"Rather burglarious, this," he resolved; "but there's the kitchen, and the door is ajar, and, for a man of inquiring mind, the temptation is mighty. Chris Crewley—you ferret!—be careful."

Thus admonishing himself, he passed the gate and entered the kitchen.

Plain it was, he had determined to explore.

The room was bare of everything; an ominous silence prevailed. His ears tingled as he listened for the slightest sound.

"Not even a rat!" he whispered, taking a survey of his surroundings.

"Guess she lives alone: cooks her own meals, sleeps in the garret—rather singular circumstances, though, for one who 'sports' a barouche and livery. I think I'll— Eh? What's that, now?"

A slight, rustling noise startled him.

"Meow!"

Crewley whirled round on his heel, and poised his umbrella aloft.

"F-i-z---spit!"

A dark object shot from the top of the range and whirled past him with a scratch and a scramble.

His nerves, just then, being in a delicate condition, he jumped backward, with a half-suppressed cry—tripping over a loose plank and falling with a crash that shook the windows. His umbrella flew one way, his hat another, and, for a second, his feet wriggled in mid air.

At the same instant he heard a hasty foot-step descending the stairs. Hurriedly regaining his equilibrium, he grasped up his umbrella, and darted into a convenient closet.

The comer was Meg Semper. The noise in the kitchen had reached her ears, and she came to see what caused it.

"Lord! what a beast!" thought Crewley, as he gazed at her through the keyhole.

The hag did present an appearance truly fearful; her head was beginning to swell—from the poisonous effects of the spider-bite—and her bleary eyes were doubly reddened and staring, in the acute pain she suffered.

"It's nothing, after all," she said, in an ill-humor. "Perhaps a cat. Satan seize it!—the door's open," and she closed the door as she spoke.

"Yes, ma'am," acquiesced Crewley, under his breath; "a cat—and it was a big black cat, a mischievous cat, a disagreeable cat, for it scared me considerable. Now, I wonder where such a picturesque devil as you ever landed from? You're the ugliest piece of humanity I ever set eyes on—Bengal, elephant or pole-cat not barred! Eh? What's she doing now?"

Meg Semper had caught sight of the lawyer's hat, which lay where it had fallen, in a far corner.

With a spiteful kick she sent it whizzing across the apartment.

"My poor hat!—cost five dollars, three years ago," groaned Crewley, within himself, as he saw the article demolished.

"There has been an intruder here," muttered the hag, as she glanced about the empty kitchen; but, she added, almost immediately: "Whoever it was, they must be gone at my coming."

"Thank you," breathed Crewley, with relief, for he feared that she would commence a search, in which event discovery was inevitable.

Suddenly a new, strange expression came upon Meg Semper's wolf-like face; her eyes glittered with a devilish fire.

"Look at her!" exclaimed the lawyer, *sotto voce*, nearly tumbling forward and betraying himself in his eagerness to see.

She was looking toward the door leading through the house, as if to make sure that no one was near. Her breath hissed through her shriveled lips; slowly she drew from her pocket a steel ring.

To the ring was attached a piece of string, and by the string she held it off from her, contemplating it with a peculiar gaze.

Another glance toward the door; then she produced the long, sharp knife she invariably carried about her person.

"A lunatic, as sure as sin!" commented Crewley, while his hair raised a little. "If she finds me out, she'll try to puncture my jugular vein! I'll have to fight like mad—and I will! skin me if I don't! What is she going to do with that ring?"

Meg Semper went to a far side of the room, and suspended the ring from a nail. Carefully steadying it, she retired several steps, muttering:

"Yes, I'll do it!—I'll do it! And I'll do it this very night, too! No more of the 'curst Talisman—no more thwarting when I have Reginald Darnley at my knife-point! One good thrust will be a stroke toward avenging my daughter's wrongs! It will be Mervin Darnley next! Both shall die!—and die soon! Orle Deice, you'll no more come between me and the fulfillment of my oath! I swore to stand by you, and you swore to stay with me till death parted us!—but, you've crossed me"—hissingly—"and no one shall cross Meg Semper. The 'curst Talisman has made me mad!—mad! It prevents me keeping my oath to my injured child! And I'm going to banish it. I'll kill you to-night!"

"Bless me! she's going to kill somebody," thought the wondering lawyer. "Talisman? What Talisman? What does she mean by that? Look!"

The hag had turned her face away from the ring on the wall, and now she was gradually backing toward it, grasping the knife firmly, and holding her arm stiff at her side.

"I haven't forgotten how to strike; no—no—but it's been a long time since I practiced. If I can hit the center—" quick as a flash of lightning she whirled about, and the gleaming blade hissed through the air. It struck the very center of the ring, burying itself deep in the hard plank.

A look of devilish satisfaction settled upon her swarthy features.

"No, I've not forgotten! That ring is your heart, Orle Deice!—your heart, I say. And as the knife pierced the plank, so shall it pierce your bosom this night! You're doomed— Ha! Devils a-loose! my head!"

She clapped her hands to her temples, as a sudden pain there wrung a cry from her lips.

The poison from the bite was circulating rapidly in her heated veins; her head was swelling larger each moment.

When she had calmed herself, she recovered the knife, and repeated the experiment with the ring. Twice, thrice she went through the significant programme, and at every blow the knife-point struck the center.

"Well, Meg Semper, what mummery is this?"

Nemil had silently approached, and was viewing her actions from the doorway.

"It is no business of yours; so begone."

"You'll find me as surly as yourself, if you choose to make me so," growled Nemil, not satisfied with her words. "Tell me what you are practicing? What means that ring?"

"Best leave me alone!" returned the hag, snappishly, the unexpected interruption and the pain in her head combining to augment her savage humor.

Just then there was a noise in the closet. The lawyer had, in his desire to get a good look at the African, stepped on some utensil which rattled and scraped beneath his feet.

In a moment Meg Semper sprang forward.

"Now, then, hang it! here's the devil to pay!" he exclaimed, as he clutched his umbrella determinedly.

He frowned, and gathered his energies for a desperate encounter, for he fully realized that he had to deal with two bloodthirsty fiends.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE MEETING.

"Out of my sight, thou serpent!"—MILTON.

REGINALD DARNLEY paced his room with thoughtful strides. His brow was knit in a

frown, his teeth hard set, and in the flashing glance of his eyes was something that told of stern mental resolve.

It was near five o'clock when a rap at the door aroused him.

Gerard Henricq entered, smiling, rubbing his hands together and bowing. The change in his victim at once struck him, and though he marveled, he said:

"Ah, Mr. Darnley, you look better than you did."

"Do I?" returned Reginald, bluntly, while he eyed the other steadfastly.

"Oh, very much; very much; and, believe me, I am glad to remark it."

"Indeed?" with sarcasm.

"Why, yes; it made me feel bad to see you so wholly given to melancholy."

"I doubt it. To the contrary, I think you regret this change."

"What!" in a reproachful tone; "think I was pleased in seeing you miserable? Why, what could introduce such folly into your ideas? I assure you, this discardment of your gloomy face is very pleasant to me, very; though I cannot guess at its cause;" the last with a faint accent of inquiry.

He had come to note the effect of Orle's visit. He knew, when he gave her Reginald's address, that she would seek the young man at once. This, while it kindled fresh flames of jealousy and hatred, he could not prevent. He was eager to ascertain in what spirits his victim would be, after being interviewed by the party who, to all appearances, had caused him so much trouble—established the basis of his entanglement within the horrible meshes of murder—so eager, that he could not bide his time till next day.

Reginald's reception was enigmatical.

"Gerard Henricq, what brings you here?" The young man was regarding him with a searching look, one which the old villain strove in vain to read.

"What brings me here? What a question! Are we not so closely allied, that the society of one is necessary to the other?" This was spoken with emphasis.

"Perhaps," returned Reginald, while a peculiar expression swept over his features, and his lips curled.

"Perhaps! Ay, but there's no doubt of it."

"You are conceited."

"And you are too bold," retorted the oily voice, significantly.

"You talk as if you thought I feared you."

Gerard Henricq was growing more perplexed.

"Do not forget, Reginald Darnley," he said, with a slight sternness, "that you are a murderer!—a penniless outcast and murderer who, but for me, would now be begging for bread in the streets of Rich— Ha! what would you?"

Reginald had him by the throat. Tightly, mercilessly pressed those fingers; and the young man's face was scarlet as he cried:

"Villain! Wretch! Vile serpent, and would be destroyer of my soul!—take back—unsay those words! Take them back, I say, or, by the Heaven above me, I'll strangle out your life!"—tighter—tighter closed the fingers.

"Reginald!—Mr. Darnley—you are choking me!" gasped Henricq, with difficulty.

Reginald was mad with passion. The blue veins stood out upon his forehead like cords, and his strength, naturally great, was doubled by the excitement of rage. His blood was fevered by the other's words, which cut him like a knife.

"Poisonous snake that you are! will you unsay those words? You charge me with murder? By Heaven! my crime shall be doubled—"

"Don't kill me!" sputtered the old man, white with fear, as he struggled for breath in that frenzied hold.

Suddenly, Reginald released him, and he staggered back, dizzily.

"There!" said the young man, calming himself; "I regret that I sullied my hands with touching you. But, have a care, Gerard Henricq"—in a meaning, half-fierce tone—"if you tempt me too far, I'll crush out your life!"

"You've nearly killed me!" brokenly articulated Henricq, as he held to a chair and panted for breath.

"The world would have lost nothing had I done so," said Reginald, in contempt.

"But you amaze me! What can you mean by—"

"I mean, that it is dangerous for you to be near me. You disgust me with your bland voice and hypocritical professions—I hate sight of you! You are a venomous reptile! There is some object hidden beneath your disinterested exterior, which has been the incentive to all you have done. I know this; I read it plainly, now that I am myself again. I repeat, you are not safe within reach of my hands! Begone!"

"Dangerous to be near you?" and the eyes behind the spectacles were glittering like the orbs of a snake when about to strike.

"Yes; so be warned."

"You forget, when you say that, that my money is essential to your comfort—yes, essential to your life. If we part, how long would you exist without money? Answer me that."

"I have all the money I want. Begone, now; leave me alone."

Gerard Henricq started as he heard this.

"All the money he wants!" he repeated, mentally. "Where did he get it? Who is his new banker? Ha! can it be, Orle Deice has won him to her again, and given him the strings to her purse? 'Sdeath! was I so far wrong in my conclusions as to the result of their interview?" Then aloud:

"May I ask whence comes this new supply of money, Mr. Darnley, and why it is more acceptable than what I offer?"

"You may, and—I shall not answer."

"You are playful," with a half-sneer.

"Then it is the play of the tiger," Reginald said, quickly; "so, be careful that you are not bitten while encouraging it."

"What if I expose you, Reginald Darnley? What if I set the bloodhounds of the law upon your track, and say to them: 'There is the murderer of Mervin Darnley!' and his eyes fired with a malicious gleam.

An indefinable look settled on Reginald's face. The blood mounted to his temples. Again the frenzy of passion was heating his veins.

Gerard Henricq saw this, and, fearing a repetition of the strangling-scene, he said, hastily:

"But, I sha'n't do that; no, I am too good a friend of yours, to think of doing it. You are in a bad state of mind this afternoon, for all you look better; and you'll regret it, some time—I mean when you think more over it." There was a significance in his closing remark.

It evidently required a great effort to speak calmly, as he did; he was smothering some terrible feeling in his breast.

Reginald vouchsafed no rejoinder. He crossed over to the window and gazed out upon the street.

"I am going, Mr. Darnley."

The young man muttered some inaudible words in reply.

Shaking his fist toward his rebellious dupe, Gerard Henricq withdrew, gritting his teeth.

As he hurried from the house, he hissed, in an undertone:

"It were better had I not striven to revive his spirits—curse him! He would cast me off, now that something has transpired to make him independent in pocket. And what is that something?—who? Is it Orle Deice? Satan! how that girl sticks to him; when he cares nothing for her, and I would sacrifice an arm to possess her! He! h—a! he called me 'serpent'! And so I am! I've not done biting yet, either, Reginald Darnley! This scar upon my cheek still smarts a little! I shall wait no longer! I'll have my revenge! The detectives will be on your track within twenty-four hours! Ha! Ha! Ha! Then you'll find out how much more the 'serpent' can bite!"

Reginald saw the form of his tempter moving away along the street, and a meaning smile wreathed the corners of his mouth as he looked after him.

"How near I came to choking out his miserable life! His words stung me to the quick; and when he uttered them, he little dreamed that I no longer feared him or his threats. He will not confront me with any more such reminders, I guess. Your coils and webs are thrown off, Gerard Henricq.

Your victim is now the master. You are dealing with a Darnley!"

He had promised to call upon Orle at eight o'clock that evening.

It was with a light heart and elastic step he left the house, when the bells of St. Aloysius were tolling seven, and turned westward.

At the corner of New York avenue and Fifteenth street, he suddenly collided with an individual who turned the corner as he neared it.

"Beg pardon, sir, I did not see you—why!" he recognized Henry Waldron.

"Your apology is accepted, sir."

"This is Mr. Waldron, is it not? We have met before, in Richmond?"

"I am making no new acquaintances, just at present," Waldron said, stiffly.

Reginald regarded him for a second, then, wheeling abruptly, he continued on.

"So," mused Waldron, gazing after him, "it is Reginald Darnley. I wonder where he is going? Now, I am curious to know more of this man who seems tangled in my affairs lately. The lawyer's absence is unaccountable. He said he would return to the hotel very shortly, and here it is after dark. I'll follow you, Reginald Darnley," uttering the last as if it were the framing of a sudden resolution, and, with the words, he began, at a safe distance, to dog Reginald's steps.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SILENT WARNING.

"The heart alone
Is Pity's dearest, holiest throne,
And when the tale of woe she hears,
Her softest answer is in tears."

—DALE.

"A troubled, dreamy maze
Of some unearthly horror * * *
Of some wild horror past, and coming woes."

—DANA.

ORLE DEICE sought Cecilia, immediately upon her return from Reginald Darnley's rooms.

"I have arranged everything," she said, as she joined her willing captive.

"Arranged everything? What?" asked Cecilia, looking up from a novel, with which she had been passing her time since Orle left her.

The beauty drew a chair near to her, and continued:

"Reginald Darnley will be here this evening."

"Ah!"

"Yes. Would you see him?"

"Would I see him?" Cecilia repeated, inquiringly.

"Would you not like to exchange a word with the man who has so cruelly deceived you?"

This with a slight flavor of triumph, which she could not conceal.

"No," was the icy reply; "he has not yet deceived me that I know of."

"But he does not love you."

"You are to prove that to-night."

"And if I do prove it?"

"Then he is nothing to me. I would not wed a man whose love is divided."

Orle's dark eyes lighted with pleasure—with satisfaction. She knew she could prove that Reginald's love was hers.

"He will be here at eight o'clock," she said. "I will have it so that you may hear every word of our conversation."

For over an hour they talked of trivial matters. Orle sought to entertain her rival pleasantly. She was now confident that no further obstacle would arise to her undisputed right to Reginald's affection.

It is strange how a woman will sometimes center the softest feelings of her heart upon a man who discourages it in every way, and is, really, not deserving of such abiding love—holding fast in that ardent passion through ills, crosses and denials; yet such cases are not so very rare, and it is a common occurrence, in an equal zest, among the sterner sex.

To a woman of passionate impulses, like Orle Deice, the retention of Reginald was a triumph. Its unmaidenly features did not appear to her as indelicate as an exacting "society" might denounce them. She loved; and that love, once set, was as a mighty rock, against which the coldest

tide or direst blast could accomplish naught; it remained immovable, and gathered fresh strength with every moment of existence.

"You were to tell me something of yourself," said Cecilia, after a pause, during which Orle gazed down at the carpet.

"Of myself?" absently.

"You remember, you were telling me why this woman, Margaret Semper, so hated Reginald Darnley, and why that hatred extended toward me—the fearful death-bed oath," shuddering as she recalled what Orle Deice had told her in the forenoon.

But Cecilia was curious to know more of the dark mystery which the beauty had partly unfolded to her.

"I asked you what there was about the Talisman. You know you said it had preserved his life."

"Yes, it has," thoughtfully. "When Meg Semper, mother of the Creole, swore vengeance for the supposed wrongs of her child, the Talisman was given me—"

"And how happened you there? Why were you involved?" interrupted Cecilia.

"Ah, yes; I'll explain. You wanted to know who I was?"

"Yes," in a tone that bespoke a great and increasing interest in her companion.

Orle smiled sadly.

"I can tell you that in a few words—I don't know who I am!"

Cecilia looked at her in surprise; and she continued:

"I have no recollection of a father or mother. I only know that, from the time I was old enough to remember anything, I was with the discarded wife of Mervin Darnley, who tenderly cared for me. She often told me, though, that she was not my mother; and if she did know aught of my parents, I guess the knowledge died with her. She had money of her own when she died, and a portion of it was appropriated to my education. You know as much of my identity, now, as I do."

"And are you happy?" asked Cecilia, softly. "Do you not yearn for a brother, or a sister—"

"Oh, yes," broke in Orle, and her mind seemed to be wandering back over the mazy past, with its uncertainties and mysteries regarding her life. "I often long for the surroundings you name."

"Then, Orle, come and live with me."

Cecilia spoke in a low, tremulous voice; the dew of tears glistened in her sweet blue eyes; her loving heart was open in an absorbing sympathy, a sister-like interest in this strange, beautiful girl. Was it pity for one who knew not father, mother, brother, or sister, with all the joys of their protecting love?

"Come and live with me," she repeated. "We will be sisters—we will love each other dearly."

Orle, too, was not without a warm emotion at this offer; but, forcing back the weird influence of the other's words, she said, quickly:

"No, no; you forget, I have other plans for my future. I know that you are sincere; I know that we could be very happy together, despite the fact of our rivalry; but you know I am to marry Reginald soon, and our home will be far, far from here"—her dark orbs sparkling with a glad light.

"And, even putting that outside," she added, "there exists a bond between Meg Semper and myself which will not permit a separation."

"A bond?"

"Yes; an oath-pledge given at the bedside of a dying woman. When the Creole was breathing her last, she made Meg Semper and I solemnly swear always to remain together. I disliked Meg; but the Creole had ever been kind to me—and I think she loved me dearly—so I gave the promise. The hatred of these two women toward the Darnleys was intense. Meg Semper vowed she would destroy the whole line, child and all. But in this vowing she had to make an exception."

"An exception?"

"Yes; for the Creole had another child shortly after the estrangement. The child she loved, although it was a Darnley—and it was excepted in the oath of vendetta."

"Is that child alive?"

"You have seen him. He does not bear the name of Darnley."

"What is his name?"

"When I say you have seen him, I mean I think you have. He was lately Reginald Darnley's valet."

"The man called Herwin Reese!" exclaimed Cecilia, in astonishment.

"It is he."

"And does he know that the one he served is his own brother?"

"He does not. I only learned it under solemn promise of secrecy—and I shall consider that you are likewise bound. Don't ever breathe anything of what I have disclosed."

"You have my promise."

"Let us say no more of him. You wanted to know about the Talisman?"

"Yes. Tell me what it means. How has it preserved Reginald's life?"

"When the oath was registered, to exterminate the Darnleys, something—I know not what—prompted me to intercede in behalf of the intended victims. I was but a little child, yet I found eloquence to plead, and I remember well, with what earnestness I strove to persuade them from the bloody scheme. They were too resolute, however, to be deterred from their purpose by my prayers. The Creole cherished a deep love for me, the little waif who was destined to be independent through her bounty, and it was a whim of hers to please me, in some way, though she could not grant my request to spare the lives—"

Orle Deice was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," she answered, in a voice indicative of displeasure at the intrusion.

It was Meg Semper. She bore a large tray, on which was spread a light, tempting repast.

"It's near luncheon," she said, with a sulken accent; "and I've brought that miss her supper."

Orle was struck with surprise as she noticed the swollen condition of Meg Semper's head. The bleary eyes were half-closed, and burned with a strange, unearthly look; and her countenance, of repulsive ugliness, was disfigured by a severe cut which extended across the mouth, from nose to chin.

"Meg, what ails your head?"

Slowly the hag raised her gaze to the speaker. Orle felt an involuntary shiver in her veins as she marked the fierce gleam in those bloodshot orbs; and a singular twitching was about the corners of the shriveled mouth.

"What ails your head?" repeated the beauty, breathlessly, while Cecilia looked on, wondering.

"Poison!" said Meg, huskily.

"Poison! How—what mean you?"

"A nasty spider!—it bit me! See! I'm swelling up. Soon, I shall burst! I'm going mad, I think—mad!" she was staring idiotically, her voice sunk to a choked, hissing whisper.

"And that cut across your face?—how came you by it?"

A peculiar grin, savage and significant, settled on the distorted visage, and the gleaming eyes seemed to shoot out sparks; but, there was no reply.

Orle arose. She was beginning to feel uneasy. Meg Semper's actions mystified her, and boded something ill.

At that instant, the beauty's attention was attracted toward the door.

Nemil stood there. A meaning look was upon his black face; one hand was raised aloft, while the forefinger of the other was placed to his thick lips.

His attitude contained a silent warning; and Orle Deice, with her eyes riveted upon him, stood, spellbound.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A QUEER LADDER.

"Is there no god" (Chris Crewley) "to befriend?"

No power to avert his miserable end?"

—POPE'S HOMER.

As Meg Semper sprung toward the closet, Nemil closed the door behind him.

He saw a disturbance in prospect, and wished to confine the inevitable noise to one room.

With a wring and a jerk, Meg tore open the closet-door, uttering a howl at the same time—for something whizzed in her face—something sharp struck her in the mouth, and she felt the warm blood oozing from a frightful gash.

It was the white umbrella. It shot out and hit its mark before a movement could be made to avoid it. Simultaneously with her howl, Christopher Crewley vented a defiant yell, and, with hair half-standing in nervous excitement, dashed forward.

"Look out!" he cried, as the hag staggered back before the terrific blow. "Dangerous, I am! Chris Crewley—yours forever, much! Rascals, both—ha!"

Whiz-z-z-z! circled the umbrella, quick as lightning-streaks, and the lawyer darted and danced about, as if a glowing coal was in each boot.

Meg Semper, with a fearful oath, leaped at him, her glistening knife-blade cutting the air in flashing circles as she had tried to reach him.

The contest was only between the hag and Crewley, Nemil biding his time, and gathering his enormous strength for an opportune moment when he could throw himself upon the lawyer.

Whiz-z-z! went the umbrella; and whir-r-r! went the knife from Meg's hand. Bestowing a whack upon her head, he turned to escape. But, quick and firm, two brawny arms glided around him, and the African laughed gutturally as he pinioned him and held him like a vise.

The lawyer was supple, active, strong and courageous, but now he wriggled, twisted and kicked in vain, to release himself from the giant grip of his antagonist.

"Be quick! Meg Semper!" growled Nemil, frowning when he discovered that he was not dealing with an ordinary man. "Quick, I say! bind his feet!"

Meg snatched up a piece of clothes-line that lay near and started to obey the order. She was met half-way by a terrible kick that sent her sprawling to the floor; and Crewley's face reddened his veins swelled as he redoubled his frantic struggles.

Tighter closed the embrace about him; like the deadly coils of a snake, the African's arms locked in on him, and a deeper scowl settled on the black visage.

"Be careful!" the negro snarled. "This man is no baby. Come guardedly."

"Nary baby!" hissed Crewley, as he strained and fought.

Meg gathered herself up and approached from behind. In a twinkling a noose was slipped around the lawyer's legs, and soon they were firmly bound. Then Nemil jerked him to the floor, and not without a great deal of trouble, turned him face downward.

In this position his hands were tied at his back, and they stood off to view their captive in triumph.

Chris Crewley was never so sorely tempted to be blasphemous as then. But, being a man of strong principle, as well as eccentric spirit, though he might have thought some pretty hard things, his teeth were clinched.

Even in that moment of defeat and suspense, his gaze wandered to his umbrella to see if it was injured.

"Now, then!—now!" screamed Meg, bending over him with a savage glare in her devilish eyes. "What do you think now, eh? You'll eavesdrop, will you? You'll steal into other peoples' homes? And now you're caught! S'pose we kill you, eh?—what then? You can't help it!—you can't!"

Crewley made a desperate attempt to kick her with his two bound feet, but having had a taste of that thing before, she was wary and nimbly avoided it.

"I say, you, let me up from here!" whined the lawyer, in a doleful voice—so doleful that it amused the swarthy African, for the frown left his brow and a broad grin yawned his capacious mouth.

Meg Semper was spiteful in her triumph. She knew that the lawyer must have been a witness to her practice with the knife and ring, and she made him pay a dear price for what he had seen. She pricked him with the sharp point of the knife, hissing the while:

"S'pose I run it into you, eh? S'pose I pierce your heart, eh? What if I cut a vein? Ho! then you'll bleed to death. If I let your

blood out, you'll die. Aren't you afraid to die? Take that!"

And she scratched him more severely with the needle-like point.

Endurance has its limit. The lawyer had maintained a heroic silence during her brief torture; but, with the last spiteful thrust, he opened his mouth in a prolonged squeal.

The grin on Nemil's face broadened.

"I say, now, look here, you'll spoil my clothes if you punch holes that way. Now, qui—ouch! Why don't you quit—a-e-h?" another squeal.

Suddenly, Meg clapped a hand over his mouth. If he could squeal, he could also cry aloud for help, and this might endanger them.

"Quick, Nemil, that piece of wood yonder—"

"Take this 'kerchief; it's best," he interrupted, as he saw her intention.

A greasy 'kerchief was forced into Crewley's mouth, much to his disgust, and under vehement protest. A few turns of the rope, from the jaw to the top of the head, secured the gag; and he nearly choked with the unpleasant morsel.

"Now, what to do with him?" said Nemil, inquiringly, as they arose from their task.

"Yes—how'll we fix him?" asked the hag.

"I'm already fixed, I think!" groaned Crewley, within himself. "They'll play 'Forty Thieves' with me, presently, no doubt—quarter me and hang me along the fence, as a warning to burglars! Lord bless me! What a 'box!' And if they knew what brought me here, they'd—"

He was interrupted in his mental surmises by an exclamation from the hag.

"The cellar, Nemil!—the cellar! Put him there and let him rot! We'll soon be away from here—h-a!"

Again the acute pain from the spider-bite caused her to bow her swollen head, and press her hands against her temples.

"The spider!—the spider!" she moaned, rocking to and fro.

"Spiders!" thought Crewley, as he caught the word. "Lord! are they going to put me in among spiders? There—I'm done for! Spiders? Horrible! Good-by to my cow-case in Richmond—plaintiff will get damages, sure, and I'll die with a ruined reputation!"

"Good," grunted Nemil, to the hag's suggestion. "We'll put him down-cellar. Your head is swelling like a bubble, Meg Semper."

"I know it!—I know it!" she howled, in pain. "The nasty thing was poisonous! My veins are on fire! My whole body aches! It will drive me mad! Ten thousand curses upon it!"

"Put water on it that it may be cool."

"I did; I bathed the wound with ice till my flesh froze. It availed nothing. Soon I shall be crazy! I feel the fierce twitching of madness at my nerves, even now! Watch me well, or I'll bite you as would a dog!"

He regarded her steadily for a moment, and knew that her words were truth. The venom from the spider's fang was eating through her blood; and the heat of excitement was an auxiliary to its rapid diffusion.

"Come," he said; "put this meddlesome dog down-cellar."

They lifted Crewley and carried him through the narrow passage beyond the kitchen, thence down a rickety stairway, finally depositing him somewhat roughly in one corner of the cellar.

The expression on Crewley's face, as he found himself dumped in an ash-heap, was comical in its extreme of gravity and despair.

Nemil gave a grunt of satisfaction; and Meg, after shaking her fist threateningly at their captive, followed the negro up-stairs, muttering as she went:

"Now, then, eavesdropper! thief! sneak! you'll lie there until the rats, and ants, and worms, and lizards come to feed upon your body! Rot! Rot like a dog that has been put to starve! The world won't miss you!"

The lawyer was left to his reflections; and uncomfortable these reflections were, too, for he believed his captors fully in earnest, and therefore saw grim death staring him in the face.

The cellar was very damp, in some places

wet, and this, in addition to his feelings under the circumstances, caused him to shiver.

It was not an actual fear of death that made him so very miserable. A brave man does not fear to die, though he may shudder and hesitate; and elements of courage were not lacking in Crewley's character.

"Hang it!" he thought, as he cast a despairing glance around his prison; "I'm afraid I'm going to bust like a soap-bubble, at last. Here's the unexpected end of Chris Crewley—if he'd lived longer, which he didn't, he might have known more, which he doesn't; which the same living less, and, being cut short before he knew enough to keep out of difficulty, thus forms the sad tale of his most foul and unnatural decease! If I only had a pencil between my teeth, now, I'd try to scribble my epitaph, somehow. Let's see—" shifting his position:

"Stranger, pause: in this ash-heap
Chris Crewley he doth lie—
The toughest lying e'er he did
To gain Eterni—"

"—no, no, no; that won't do—that won't do! Go off with a ruined reputation, sure, if anybody— Eh? Hello!"

To his infinite astonishment, he drew one hand from behind him and held it in front of his face, viewing it with widened eyes.

How that hand got loose he could not imagine; nor did he pause to question his miraculous release, but, in a trice, he had torn the gag from his mouth and freed his limbs.

Ten minutes after the departure of Meg Semper and Nemil, he was striding to and fro, trying to devise means for escape.

At one side was a square window; but this was too small for him to pass through, and besides had an iron bar across it.

On tiptoe he ascended the stairway. The door here was fastened securely. At first he resolved to force it; but on second thought he shook his head and glided noiselessly back to the cellar.

"Won't do! If I make a racket, they'll be on me like a regiment of elephants! And that son of Ebon is as strong as seventeen giants!"

As he once again walked up and down across the earth floor, a brilliant idea entered his brain. He stopped short; his gaze rested on the chimney-place.

Another moment, and he was looking up the sooty flue at a little square patch of bright blue sky.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed jubilantly, while one of those very rare smiles puckered his lips; and then, relapsing to a sober mood, he added:

"Some people prefer riches and 'clover:' some are content with reason's share of life's goodies. But, as for me—give me a first-class chimney-flue, with the smallest particle of a chance for liberty at t'other end of it! If I only had my umbrella now, I'd be a happy man. And my hat"—feeling his cranium—"that's lost, too. Chris Crewley, wake up; you want liberty, and a diabolical vengeance on the destroyers of your wardrobe!" and as he concluded, he vanished up the chimney.

The task he had undertaken was no easy one; nor was it without innumerable discouragements.

First, he discovered that the chimney was remarkably small. Next, as he scratched and scraped his way upward, the soot and dust vibrated and settled in a suffocating cloud, causing him to choke, cough, spit and squirm in a desperate search for air.

It was slow work, too. Once his hold slipped, and he sunk downward a few feet, when, to his dismay, he found himself jammed tight and helpless.

The atmosphere thickened; he was nearly smothered.

"Haugh! Haugh!—ph-e-w-ugh! What'll I do now?" he gasped. "Chris Crewley, you'd never make a chimney-sweep in the world! Bless me! I'm tight. I'm fastened up! Can't budge an inch"—even as he sputtered the words, his long, lank limbs suddenly loosened, and, but for a timely movement, he would have fallen with a crash to the bottom.

Again, through the dirt and grime, he began his way upward.

"Hang it!"—muttering—"who'd ever thought to see me in such a pickle? And, there's my umbrel—haugh!—brel—haugh!—"

brella—hachew!—and hat gone! Expect I'll find myself choked to death when I get out of this!"

He ventured a glance above him

"Most up! Courage, Crewley, you vagabond! You're 'most out."

With many slips, another jam, continued coughing, and occasional words of self-encouragement, the lawyer at last placed his hand on the topmost brick.

"Now, we'll rest a minute," he resolved; and he settled himself, by attractive pressure, to recover breath.

The fresh air just reached him in his cramped position, and he snuffed the welcome draught with pleasure.

But, while thus resting, a most singular idea entered his head.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, in trepidation of mind, "what if my pressing in opposite directions this way should split the chimney! Crewley—look out!"

He raised himself to the chimney's edge and leaned over. As he did so, he gave vent to a prolonged groan—one that told of new despair.

The roof was a slanting one, and rather steep, and he was at least eight feet above it.

To make that jump was to incur the risk of life; and Crewley's heart sunk as he realized it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TALISMAN.

"My soul is hushed within me, and a dread
Of what I know not, chains mine awe-struck
thought." —DUGANNE.

A STRANGE, unspeakable feeling crept over Orle Deice during the few seconds' stillness that reigned in the room.

Cecilia glanced from one to another, of the beauty and the hag, in conjecturing wonder, and her heart palpitated faster and faster. She remembered that once, in company with her father, she had visited an asylum for the insane, and gazed shudderingly on its shrieking, howling, groaning inmates; and as she marked the baleful glitter of Meg Semper's eyes—her distorted face, with its bloody scar, the trembling nervousness of arm and limb, the crouching poise of the body, and steadfast, burning gaze—she thought of the moaning lunatics who rattled their prison bars, and cried aloud in maddening accents.

What meant this horrible figure? What did it portend? Such questions flitted through her brain, and awed her more and more.

Just then she, too, saw the tall form of the African in the doorway—noted the upraised hand and silent admonition of the finger.

Meg took a step forward; her half-closed, reddened orbs, that fairly scintillated in their unearthly stare, were fastened upon Orle Deice; and her jaw worked as she chewed upon her gums, her talon fingers twitched convulsively.

Nemil left his position at the door, and noiselessly drew near. Not a movement of the hag escaped him.

"Meg Semper," cried Orle, as she recoiled a step, "what means this fearful exhibition? Explain!—are you mad?"

"Mad!—mad!—mad!" repeated the hag, slowly, crouching lower, as if she meditated a spring; and then an incoherent muttering issued from her thin lips, the hands worked faster, her nervousness momentarily increased.

Cecilia now became thoroughly alarmed.

"Orle, take care—you are in danger!" she said, in a low, faltering voice.

The beauty seemed suddenly to perceive this, and immediately a deep blush mantled her face, her recoiling form straightened, the lips were compressed, and one hand sought her bosom.

Nemil paused, raised his hand, and gave her a meaning look.

"Beware!" said that look. "If she sees your knife, it will add to her madness! She is half crazed now!"

Meg Semper took another step, but, as she did so, an arm stretched toward her, a strong hand closed upon her wrist.

She uttered a quick, sharp cry that was half yelp, and started back. But there was no struggle, no resistance to that hold; she

stood erect, and gazed at Nemil in an indefinable way.

"Come," he said, and the guttural voice was lowered to its mildest tonation. "Come away from this. You don't want to stay. Come, Meg Semper—come."

Her head drooped; with passive steps she was led from the room, and Orle and Cecilia were alone. The beauty sunk into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"She has frightened you," said Cecilia, going to her side.

"No, no; not so much that," returned Orle, without looking up. "I could meet her. Had she leaped upon me, I would have stricken her with the dagger I carry. But I feel strangely now—I feel that this is not the last. She said a spider had bitten her, did she not?—yes; I remember. It must have been very poisonous. She is nearly insane from its effects. She means me harm."

"Are you not safe while the negro is with you?"

"Nemil thinks a great deal of me, if he is surly sometimes. But he owes much to Meg Semper—she picked him out of the street when he was a boy. He has been with her ever since, living well, and doing nothing, save to perform her errands and mine."

"Would he not protect you, in case of necessity?"

"I fear not, if he had to harm Meg in so doing."

"But she is out of her senses."

"I know that—I see it; and Nemil must see it, too."

"What is to be done?"

To this inquiry Orle made no answer. Cecilia was about to repeat it, when Nemil reappeared before them.

Orle's quick ear caught the sound of his footstep, and she raised her head.

"Nemil?"

He had closed the door when he entered, and now glanced toward it to see if it was still shut. Satisfying himself on this point, he said, addressing Orle:

"You had best get out of this."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Do I not say what I mean? You had best get out of this."

"But why, Nemil?"

"You are in danger."

"Ha!"

"Sh!"—another glance at the door—"Meg Semper seeks your life!"

Orle started to her feet.

"Seeks my life? Do you say she seeks my life? She dare not harm me. She has sworn to stand—"

The African frowned as he interrupted her with:

"She is crazed; and crazy people care little for oaths."

"She would kill me?"

Orle seemed not to comprehend.

"I tell you, yes! This afternoon I came upon her in the kitchen; she was practicing with a knife and ring—"

"I have seen her at the same practice, years ago!" Orle exclaimed, breathlessly.

"The ring, she said to herself—but I heard—was your heart!"

Orle Deice was, for a second, speechless.

"I can't go to-night, Nemil," she said, at length.

"In the morning, then. The sooner the better for you. I care not when, nor how, nor if at all. You've paid me honestly, though, for a long time, and now I put you on your guard."

"Can you keep her away from me to-night? I will be gone in the morning."

"One can promise to try—no more," answered the negro. "I will try."

"Do so, Nemil; I'll pay you twenty dollars if you succeed. You'll find the money here, on the mantelpiece, when I am gone."

He nodded his head and withdrew.

"I knew it!" Orle cried, uneasily. "I told you something was pending that boded no good! You see? That woman would take my life."

Cecilia shuddered.

"Are you brave?" suddenly asked the beauty, as she paused in an excited walk before her companion.

"Brave?" repeated Cecilia, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes; if Meg should escape from him, and come at me in the fury of her madness,

would you help me? Have you a stout heart? Would you help me to fight for my life?"

"I am not a coward, Orle," Cecilia said, calmly.

The answer was that of a brave girl—one who realized danger and could face it.

But, almost before that reply died out, she added:

"Don't you think it's very chilly for a summer night? The air seems to have changed—"

"Oh, no; you are affected with what has passed. That's all. The room is very close, to me. Wait till I light the lamp; it is very dark."

Orle strove to appear calm. Though, while she spoke, her bosom was heaving—her lovely face glowed with an unusual color.

When she had lighted the lamp, she resumed her seat, and Cecilia drew near.

"So you will flee this place to-night?"

"Yes," answered the beauty. "To remain is to court death."

For a long time neither spoke. The teatray, with its spreading of delicate viands, was forgotten, and the two girls sat in silence.

"You were speaking of the Talisman," Cecilia said, after a while. "The coming of that woman interrupted you. Will you finish now?"

"Yes; I want you to know all, since I have told you a part. Let me see—where did I leave off? I am confused."

"You were saying that the Creole sought some means to please you, though she would not undo the fearful oath to exterminate—"

"Ah, yes; I remember. There is little more for me to tell you. It was a fancy of hers to grant me something; so she created a Talisman. She said:

"I give you, my little pet, a Talisman, which you may use five times. Meg Semper will swear to obey it, and whenever it appears, desist from anything she is about to do."

"Then she took up the candle that burned at the bedside, and, for a second, held her hand in the flame."

"That is it," said she. "Know it as the Flaming Talisman. Whenever your hand shall appear, with a single tongue of flame in its palm, Meg Semper shall stop at once, in anything she may be doing."

"And Meg swore to obey. To a child, as I was then, this was pleasing in its weirdness. The Creole little dreamed—nor did I—that it was to be of so great a value to me, in saving the life of the man whom destiny had chosen for my love. I have used the Talisman three times."

"How have you used it?"

"Immediately after the death of the Creole, I had a small piece of wood carved and gilded to resemble a single tongue of flame; and that is always in my bosom. See—here it is," and as she spoke she adjusted the article in her hand and held it aloft.

"What a strange story," commented Cecilia, musingly.

"A romance that has its tragedy," returned Orle.

Time slipped by. They heard the half-hour stroke of a distant bell.

"Nearly eight o'clock. Reginald will be here soon now."

"Where will you secrete me?"

"In that closet," (pointing across the room).

"You see, it has a ventilator; so you will not be uncomfortable."

Another hour was to decide Cecilia Bernard's love. And as she pondered on the approaching interview between her rival and the man who held her promise of marriage, a vision of Henry Waldron rose before her, with a picture of that morning when he pleaded in vain, and left her in such sorrow. His soft entreaties seemed, then, to be whispering in her ears; the short moment in which he had drawn her to him in a warm embrace of love, and the strange answers she had been compelled to give his eager questions—all was passing in her mind like a panorama; until at last she felt that, were he before her now, she would have pillowed her head upon his breast and spoken any words he desired.

Orle did not break her reveries, for she, also, was thinking deeply. Her meditative

dream was of gay scenes when she saw herself mingling with the votaries of pleasure, leaning on a husband's arm, and that husband Reginald Darnley.

The two were aroused by a summons at the front door.

"It is he!" Orle exclaimed, arising. "There—hide in the closet. I will go myself," and she hurried away.

CHAPTER XXV.

GERARD HENRICQ UNMASKS.

"I have search'd my soul within,
And find naught but pride and scorn."
—CAREW.

"The passions of the mightiest shell
That ever rapt the choir above,
Were all too weak and cold to tell
The warm extravagance of love."

As Orle Deice descended the stairs, to admit her expected lover, the door of a room near the apartment she had just left, slowly opened, and a shadowy figure glided after her.

As the specter-like form passed the window at the head of the stairs, where the dim light of the stars shed an uncertain glimmer, we see that it is Meg Semper.

Her head was just twice its natural size; on the scarred and bloated face dwelt a mold of feature that was ferocious; in one hand glistened the knife she had sworn to sheathe in the bosom of the beautiful girl.

Where was Nemil? How had the hag escaped his vigilance, when he had promised to keep close watch upon her? We shall see, anon.

Orle must have felt the presence of danger, for, as she groped in the darkness of the hall below, she clutched her sharp dagger, as if preparing to repel the attack of an enemy who lurked, unseen, near her.

But, she reached the door, and threw it open. A man stood upon the steps.

"Reginald," she said, lowly.

"It is not Reginald!" exclaimed a familiar voice.

"Herwin Reese!" the name was stammered forth in surprise, and she retreated before him as he entered.

"Yes, it is I—Herwin Reese."

Closing the door after him, he took hold of her wrist, and started to grope his way up the stairs.

"Unhand me, Herwin Reese."

"I fear to," was the significant response.

"You might elude me."

"Elude you?"

"Yes; run from me and defy me."

"You speak and act in riddles. Explain yourself."

"Come with me, and see. I want to talk with you."

Hardly knowing why, she permitted him to lead her, without further remonstrance, and his hold perceptibly tightened as he ascended to the second story.

Conducting her to a side room, he closed and locked the door, and withdrew the key—just as the crouching, skulking form of Meg Semper approached to within a few feet of them.

On the mantel-piece was a lamp, and this he proceeded to light.

He no longer wore the disguise which had enabled him to be near Reginald Darnley, and, as Gerard Henricq, to plot the young man's ruin; but, with his smooth face and tasty attire, he stood before her, and for a few seconds contemplated her in silence.

"I do not understand this. Unlock that door, sir," Orle said, at last, in an imperative tone.

Reese smiled grimly and retained his position, while his eyes were riveted burningly upon her.

"Will you unlock that door, sir?"

"No," calmly—so calm that it thrilled her indefinitely.

She felt strangely, now, in this man's presence. There was that in his manner to cause her much uneasiness. Not for a moment did his gaze turn from her, and his silence added to the gloom which gradually crept round her heart.

"Herwin Reese"—she drew herself up and returned that gaze with a flashing glance—"if you have nothing to say to me, let me depart. You look at me, as if you had never seen me till now. Why did you bring me here—"

"Orle, I want to talk with you. I want to convince you by reasoning, if I can, that you are throwing yourself away."

So, it was out. Her keen perception at once discovered his intent.

"And you thought it necessary to make me a prisoner, while you plead a love I despise?" sarcastic and disdainful.

"Beware! men grow desperate, sometimes."

"When a man grows desperate, I fear him; but a coward—do I tremble? Your threats are lost, sir."

He was chafing sorely; but, controlling an anger that would have made him hasty, he said:

"You who are so proud, so beautiful, so gifted, should not become the wife of a man who is unworthy even the friendship of his fellow-men. Reginald Darnley does not deserve such a gem as you are—"

"Stop, Herwin Reese!—stop right there! You have used such language before now, and it will avail you as little as in the past. Have I not told you, I will not hear him slandered?—especially by you!" the last with a sarcasm which he well understood.

His temples reddened; but he persisted:

"I am advising you for your own good. This man—"

"Cease. I will not listen."

"But you shall listen!" he cried, fiercely, while his fist clinched, and he took a step toward her.

"Shall, did you say?"—taller grew the lovely form of the speaker, her cheek paled, and the dark orbs hardened in their sparkle as she eyed him from head to foot. Then, with a gesture of contempt, she added: "I think you forget yourself."

"No, I do not," was the quick reply. "I say you shall hear me, and hear me through. Your ears shall listen to something I have not yet told you of the worthless dog who has ensnared your affection."

A sharp, barbed retort was upon Orle's lips; she half-started forward, as if she would strike him, and indignation brought back the crimson to her face. She checked herself, however, and Reese went on:

"You know, I presume, that he is penniless? His father disowned him," this with a sneer.

"I do."

"He told you so, this afternoon—you called on him, without delay, after I gave you his address?"

"You are a good guesser."

"Yes? And, perhaps, he also told you that he was a murderer?" maliciously.

"Again you have guessed correctly."

Orle embarrassed him with her calmness. She was cold as ice.

"Orle Deice, would you marry a murderer?—an outcast?—a man for whose punishment the law thirsts? Would you link your life with such an one?—swear, at the marriage altar, to love, honor, and obey him?" he was warming with his subject; and it was contagious, for, advancing to within a few feet of him, she cried, in a quick accent:

"Yes, Herwin Reese—yes! Were he a murderer, an outcast, all that you have so basely pictured him, my place would be at his side! I would wed him, though the law were to sacrifice him within the same hour! I would wed him, though all the world pointed at him and hissed him as he walked along! I would wed him—because I love him! Are you answered?" and, fairly panting with the heat in which she delivered this speech, she drew back, and flashed a withering glance upon the astounded villain.

Astounded? Yes. Herwin Reese had never, till then, known the full depth of this passionate girl's love for his hated rival. Her words took him aback; he seemed hardly able to realize.

"You are crazy, Orle Deice!" he exclaimed.

"No, I am not crazy! But, let me repeat, this will avail you nothing. Reginald is not a murderer—I know he is not. Nor is he an outcast, though he may be penniless. And I, Orle Deice, have money enough for us both."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, a dark frown knitting his brows. "You say he is not a murderer?—I know better. He poisoned his father, that he might inherit wealth. That is why he left Richmond."

"You contradict yourself. You said, just now, that he was disowned. If such were the case, how possible to inherit wealth at his father's death?"

Reese bit his lip.

"No matter. I say he did do it. That is sufficient."

"Who drove him to the deed?" asked Orle, suddenly, as a strange thought entered her mind.

"I did!" was the prompt reply. "I lured him on until he became what he now is. I furnished him the poison. That poison was administered the night before he left Richmond."

"Are you sure of this?"

Reese hesitated for a second. The low tone, the searching glance of the questioner struck him as peculiar.

"Sure. Mervin Darnley was a corpse, beyond doubt, within twenty-four hours afterward."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!—Ha! ha! ha! ha!—"

"What does that mean, girl? What are you laughing at?" Reese was out of patience; he scowled, he ground his teeth, for he felt that she was playing with him in some way.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!—"

"Orle Deice!"

He advanced toward her, with hand outstretched.

But, quickly recovering from her mysterious outburst of humor, she waved him back.

"Keep off! Don't dare to approach me! You ask me what I mean?—ha! ha! ha! I am laughing at you, Herwin Reese; it pleases me to know that your foul scheming has been in vain! Your game has been blocked by a kind Providence. Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

"Orle Deice!"—if it were possible for a man to foam at the mouth, then Reese was in that condition.

Suddenly her manner sobered, and she said, with marked emphasis:

"I left Richmond a day later than Reginald Darnley. I saw Mervin Darnley on the street the evening of my departure, and he was as well as you or I! Now, what think you?"

He started back. This was unexpected, and, to him, impossible. He asked himself if she spoke the truth.

"You do not mean it? You trifle?"

"Ay, but I do! Wait. You will see, ere long, whether I speak the truth."

Just then there was another summons at the front door, and an expression of inquiry dwelt in the face of Herwin Reese.

Orle smiled.

"Unlock the door, sir."

"Do you know who that is?" he asked.

"Yes; it is Reginald Darnley."

"Perdition catch him! He is here to see you!"

"What else could bring him? Unlock the door at once, lest I raise my voice in a cry for help. If he hears me, he will force his way in here, and you know well enough he is no coward."

Reese strode to the door and wrung it open, Orle lost no time in gliding out.

When alone, the villain strode to and fro, with folded arms and bowed head, reflecting upon what he had heard.

He could not understand or imagine how it was possible that the poison should have failed to destroy Mervin Darnley. It was a subtle, deadly drug, which Meg Semper herself had compounded, and when he had received it from her, it was with the assurance that, once administered, no antidote on earth could counteract its effects.

"Has Reginald Darnley so completely deceived me, after all?" he muttered. "Can it be that he did not put the stuff into the ale? No—yet it is perplexing to me; I cannot account for it. I know Orle would not have spoken so confidently, had there been any doubt about it! I am in a maze," and the cloud upon his brow drew darker, as he stood there thinking, marveling, conjecturing.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOT YET! NOT YET!

AGAIN Meg Semper followed after Orle Deice with ghost-like stealth, as the latter started to answer the second summons at the front door.

From the lips of the hag came a gibbering

sound that was smothered to an incoherent articulation, and then she muttered, in a whisper that resembled the sibilant hiss of a serpent:

"This time!—this time! I'll be sure to do 't now! She's doomed! She shall die! I'll have no more of the 'curst Talisman! My knife is newly sharpened for 't! So they thought to make me a prisoner, eh? Ha! ha! I know I'm mad! but I've not forgot my cunning. Ono! my cunning."

Orle Deice screamed not how near death hovered, as she moved along the dark passage of that deserted house.

When the girl threw open the door, it was to meet the embrace of her lover.

"Reginald!"

"Orle! My queen!"

A fervent kiss accompanied the embrace, when, extricating herself from his passionate caresses, she led him to the room where Cecilia, in a suspense that is indefinable, awaited the interview which was to contain so much of import to her future.

When the two entered the apartment, all was still; a weird fascination seemed to hover in its atmosphere.

"Once more, Orle, my beautiful, beautiful queen! Once more the sweet meeting as of old!"

"And once more, Reginald, I am happy; for I know you will not now prove recreant to the many vows which made you mine."

She seated herself on a lounge, and beckoned him to her side. He was not loth to obey the call, and while he showered kisses on those lips that had so often turned to his with an ecstatic pressure, he cried, ardently:

"Prove recreant, Orle? Never! How can you think it? As before, I am now, your slave. It is a glorious captivity. Will you hold me forever?"

"Forever, Reginald. Oh! you never can know what I have suffered since we last met—in Richmond, I mean."

Her words were well calculated to arouse inquiry regarding her mysterious disappearance on the night of the opening of our story; but, under the circumstances, it was forgotten.

"And I have caused you this suffering!" he said, in a tone of self-reproach. "How unmanly I have acted! I ought to have seen that you were the only one I could love; I should have argued with myself how unreasonable to marry a woman whom I love less than I do you. My duty was to go to Cecilia Bernard, and tell her, honestly, that the best love of my heart was not for her. She would have released me—I know she would; for she is a good, a noble girl, Orle."

"Yes, she is a noble girl. I have seen her," and Orle thought of her who listened to their conversation.

When the first happy transports of their meeting lulled—a meeting that proclaimed them inseparable for life—the voice of the girl changed somewhat from its whispering music to a business strain.

"Reginald," she cried, "I must leave this house to night."

"How!" the word was questioning.

"I must escape from here—"

"Escape! Are you a prisoner?" and he looked at her in surprise.

"No, not a prisoner; but I am in danger."

"Danger? Explain, Orle—what do you mean?"

"I cannot explain fully, dear Reginald; but I must tell you that every moment I remain here I imperil my life."

He drew her closer to him, and gazed wonderingly into her lovely face.

"I had hoped we might spend a long, joyful evening together," she added. "We cannot, though. If you place any value on my life, go at once for a cab. In the morning we can leave for Richmond, where I will hurry my wardrobe together. We will go from there to Charleston, thence—"

"To Richmond, Orle? I cannot go there."

"Why not? There is nothing to fear. Besides, all the money I possess is in that city. Without money we can do nothing. Our marriage can be consummated with dispatch; when we go from Richmond, we will go as man and wife."

Reginald appeared to be thinking.

"You do not hesitate to grant what I ask?" persuasively.

"This is all very mysterious," he mused, aloud. "How is your life in danger? I cannot understand."

"If you love me, Reginald, do not stop now to ask questions. When we are safely away, I will tell you all."

He arose from the lounge.

"Your wish is my law, Orle."

"And every moment is precious. I would not die in this hour, Reginald, when life is doubly dear to me."

"You set my mind in a whirl by your fearful words!"

"There, there—go and get the cab. Save me."

The singular change in Orle's manner—the sudden, mysterious announcement that a violent death threatened her, filled his mind with turbid wonderment and conjecture.

But she had besought him not to pause for questions; on his value of her life, she had begged him make haste, and, in a state of excitement impossible to describe, he clasped her to him in a final caress, then hurried away.

She followed him to the entry, again adjured him to make haste, and when she heard the front door close, she re-entered her apartment.

Cecilia stood before her, with pale face and cold, gazing eyes.

"Well, you have heard?" asked the beauty.

"Yes—all."

"You are convinced, then, that Reginald loves me more than he does you?"

"Yes."

"And you relinquish all claim upon him?"

"Yes. As I have said, I would never wed a man whose love is divided."

"Thank you!—thank you!"

Orle threw her arms around the other's neck and kissed her.

They were startled by a catlike step behind them.

Cecilia uttered a cry, and Orle wheeled round to find herself face to face with a demon shape—a thing hardly human—which crouched down nearly to the floor, and glared upon her with eyes that were scarce discernible but for their snaky glitter.

"Meg Semper!"

Orle recoiled before the terrible being that confronted her.

The swollen head, the frightful gash upon the mouth, the jagged edges of which were puffed, cushion-like, and blistering in the terrible fever that consumed her; the ferocious expression of a face distorted, and half hidden by matted locks of hair that fell reckless and wild upon the brow; the nervous swaying of the body, as if influenced by strong drink; the hard grip upon a murderous knife, whose blade was fresh and keen from the whetstone—all this was a picture sufficient to terrify stouter hearts than throbbed in the bosoms of the two girls.

Orle and Cecilia exchanged a quick glance. Simultaneously a shining dagger appeared in the hand of each, and, with ashen faces, and compressed, bloodless lips, they dared to brave the Satanic form.

"Meg Semper—begone!" cried Orle, though her voice faltered. "Begone, I say!"

Meg glided nearer, nearer; a hollow laugh, that told but too well of her insanity, issued from between her grinding gums.

Quick as a flash, she straightened up, and reeled toward them with a drunken step.

"Strike, Cecilia!—strike!" and as Orle uttered the words, two springy blades cut mercilessly deep in the hideous visage of the hag.

With a yelping tone that told of pain and rage, the wounded hag staggered backward—but only for a second. Gathering all the strength of a maniac fury, she sprung at them, though her vision was blurred by the warm life-tide gushing from her wounds.

Again the two daggers struck the tottering form; but their aim was less true than at first, the headlong attack was not checked,

and Orle retreated, with an ugly cut upon her snowy arm.

The hag followed them up closely. Her long knife fairly whizzed as she madly circled and plunged it at them.

Suddenly Cecilia uttered a shriek of horror.

Orle had tripped and fallen to the floor, and the dagger—her only hope—flew from her grasp.

Meg Semper, with a savage cry, threw herself upon the prostrate girl, and Cecilia, overcome by the bloody prospect, swooned away.

The knife was poised on high—in another moment it would descend to its human sheath.

Orle closed her eyes, and, with a prayer on her lips, awaited the fatal blow.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE ROOM.

"Most sorry wretch! whose rage-burnt bosom seethes

In hateful fires, nor will to reason bend;
While reeking knife tells of the hell she breathes

Through Fury's network, and—is this the end?"

—ANON.

FROM his elevated perch, Christopher Crewley took a survey of his surroundings. Then he contemplated himself.

His duster was torn and dirty; his hands were blackened with soot; and he felt that his face might be anything but clean.

"Well, well, well!" he thought. "If this don't beat all conscience! Never was in such a 'box'! Shall I slide down again, and accept a period to my existence, in that slimy cellar?—like one who wraps the mantle of his couch about him, and lies down to sweet repose! Hardly! Shall I jump to the roof, and break my neck with a 2:17 1 4 sail to the ground? Scarcely! Crewley, you're beat!" and the last was dolefully whined forth, as he glanced, for a second time, north, south, east and west.

"No use!" groaned the despairing lawyer. "I can't make that jump, if I have to hang on here till doomsday, and I won't go back to that cellar, if I have to live on bricks and mortar, meantime. Think I'll hang it out on this line 'if it takes all summer!'"

He closed the sentence with a determined nod, and again settled himself, by pressure, in the chimney.

Just as he did so, he heard a sound beneath him that resembled the growl of a bear. So sudden was it that it startled him, and he came near slipping from his hold.

"Bless me! what's that?"

He glanced downward, between his knees, and, straining his eyes, he managed to distinguish a face. It was a black face, and the voice was Nemil's that growled:

"Come down!"

"What for? Suits me better up here."

"Come down!" and the growl was a snarl.

"You don't want me to scratch through all that soot again, now, do you?"

"Come down!" repeated the negro, with a threatening accent.

"Shan't do it! Now you've got it, flat!"

"Shoot you, if you don't come down!" warned the guttural voice.

Crewley heard the cocking of a pistol.

"Bless me! you wouldn't plug a fellow in that style—"

"Come down, or I fire."

"Fire away, then—hang it!"

The chimney was a double one, and as the lawyer uttered this defiance, he scrambled, with remarkable alacrity, over into the adjoining flue—nearly losing his equilibrium and going headlong downward.

From his new position, he thrust his head over the partitioning brickwork, and squeaked:

"Fire away, you son of Ebon! Where are we now? Chris Crewley—yours forever, mur—"

"Bang!" a pistol-bullet whistled close to his nose, and he involuntarily placed his hand to the organ named, under the impression that it was gone.

"Try it again!" he yelled, this time looking more cautiously down to where his enemy had been.

But Nemil had disappeared.

Following the negro, after he and Meg had left their captive in the cellar, we find him, an hour afterward, standing alone in the lower hall of the house, his woolly head hung in thought.

"What good?" he ruminated. "Will it better us to have this man's carcass tell a tale upon us when we are gone? None. I marvel why he came here. He's no thief—I know the faces of such too well to misclass him. Curiosity, I guess; an idle meddler, with no object. So, if he go away, what harm is done?"

He retraced his way to the cellar. But Crewley had disappeared.

At first, his thick brain was at loss. Soon, however, a kind of instinct drew his attention to the chimney-place, and he glanced up it. The discovery he made was followed by a summons for the lawyer to descend; with what result, we have seen.

Cursing himself for not having knotted the rope tighter, he ascended the stairs, carefully locking the door. He continued on to the roof of the house, and, with a grunt of satisfaction, securely fastened down the trap-door.

"Let him stay where he is!" he muttered. "If he escape now, I'll brain myself for a dolt! I would have set him free—fool!"

When Meg Semper started for the room in which were Orle Deice and Cecilia, the African observed that her condition was growing dangerous. He saw that, with every moment, the poison from the spider-fang made her wilder—and that wildness was the more to be feared because of her unusual, moping silence.

"She is getting devilish," he muttered, as he followed her with a thoughtful gaze. "She means some harm to Orle Deice, for I heard her say it. I want no blood spilt here; I'm not minded to sit behind prison-bars, with a stale crust to munch upon. I'll watch you, Meg Semper," and he stole noiselessly after her.

When he had persuaded her away from the frightened girls—as shown in a previous chapter—she sought her room. Nemil followed.

"What do you want at my heels?" she snapped, turning suddenly upon him.

"I want sleep," he answered. "There's a rug in your room that rests my bones marvelously when I lie upon it."

Instantly she suspected that he was watching her.

"Come on, then."

He failed to perceive the cunning gleam that fired her half-blind eyes, and cast himself upon the rug he had mentioned.

In the same moment, however, he arose, and returned to Orle Deice with the warning of her peril.

Rejoining the hag, he found her seated near the window, her hands in her lap, and gaze bent absently on the floor. But she had been active during his absence. In the folds of her dress she now held a small vial, and though she seemed lost to her surroundings, she was quietly noting his every movement.

When Nemil stretched himself out full length on the soft rug, he pretended to fall asleep. But this artificial repose was fatal to his intentions. Night's shades were creeping into the room; a drowsy air, combined with the increasing dark, and it was not long ere he actually slumbered.

Then the hag arose from her chair and stealthily approached him.

He snored loudly; and a diabolical grin wrestled with the stiffness of her face, as she slowly uncorked the vial.

She held the tiny bottle close to his nose. A peculiar odor began to float in the atmosphere of the room. He writhed and groaned in his sleep; but the drug had already commenced its work, he was fast yielding to its powerful influence.

When she deemed him helpless, she recorked the vial, and with a dizzy head (for she had inhaled much of the stuff herself) staggered to the bed. In a twinkling she tore the quilt into strips and proceeded to bind his arms, wrists and ankles.

As she finished her task, she heard the summons at the front door, and, passing out into the entryway, caught sight of Orle Deice, who dimly flitted before her.

Nemil was not long in recovering from the effects of the drug.

A curse that was deep and dire spoke his chagrin at being outwitted by the hag.

He strained and tugged at his bonds; but Meg had knotted them with no novice hand, and his struggles went for naught. After repeated desperate attempts to release himself, he gave it up, and lay there, foaming curseful anathemas.

Then he heard some one at the front door—voices—footsteps—silence. Pretty soon, the footsteps again, followed by another closing of the door.

Suddenly a piercing shriek echoed through the house; and roused to a desperation bordering on madness, he centered his enormous strength in one final, mighty effort, and snapped the bonds.

Without delay he loosened his limbs, and dashed away in the direction of sounds that told him of a fearful struggle going on.

He reached Orle's room, just in time to see Herwin Reese reeling backward, with a murderous wound in his throat.

Meg Semper, blinded by her own blood, and that of the man who had felt the keen point of her weapon, now turned upon the African with a mad, furious yell.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DROP SCENE.

It was now growing dark. Long shadows had stretched their last length beyond the trees of the White House Lot, and the music of the band that discoursed to merry promenaders, at the grounds of the Presidential mansion, floated in dreary cadence upon the still surroundings.

A head, disordered and dirty, was just visible above the edge of a chimney on one of the houses near the foot of Seventeenth street.

Poor Crewley! If man ever perspired in torture, the unfortunate lawyer was one.

When the dusky shades began to deepen, he ventured one more survey of the locality, shaking his head and groaning, as his eyes roved, after their wandering gaze, to the roof.

It may appear that eight feet above the roof of a house was not so elevated a "berth," after all, and that a man of Crewley's elongated limbs might easily "hang and drop," the hazard being hardly two feet. But, when we consider the slant of a real old-fashioned gable, the fact of moss-growth on the shingles, and the nervous temperament of the individual, we must allow for his timidity.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, why can't I build myself down?"

When Christopher Crewley smiled, that smile meant something, and the self-satisfied expression which lit up his besmeared countenance as he uttered these words, indicated the conceiving of a brilliant idea.

What he meant we see at once, for he immediately tore off a brick and hurled it over into the air. He was unbuilding the chimney!

While thus working—a slow, difficult task, for the bricks stuck pretty firm, notwithstanding the decay age had wrought upon the mortar—the murmur of voices reached him. It came up the flue into which he had scrambled to escape Nemil's pistol shot.

"Thought so," he muttered. "Now, see, if I'd gone down, as I was tempted to once, I'd have come out in some room or other, and landed right on top of—Bless me! how they stick. The fellow must have nailed 'em fast! They won't—(wrench!)—won't—(wrench!)—c-o-m-e!" finally disturbing a stubborn brick and casting it, with a spiteful twist of the wrist, away from him.

Just then he paused. He saw a man coming toward the house.

"I've a good notion to sing out and let him know I'm—Eh? Well, now! Why, hang it!—what's he doing here?"

He had recognized Herwin Reese, and knew him well as the valet of Reginald Darnley.

"Well!—of all the gangs I ever did come across! Now, here's another. I know he's going to stop here—yes—there! I said so."

Reese disappeared, and Crewley heard the door-knocker rap sharply.

This circumstance set him to thinking. He wondered what Reese could have in com-

mon with the parties he was tracking. How long he was idle in mental conjecture, he knew not, but he was aroused by seeing some one else approaching.

Again there was an exclamation of surprise on the part of the lawyer, for he discovered this second comer to be Reginald Darnley.

The young man had no sooner entered the house than another form, that had evidently been following close behind him, crossed the street, and stood leaning against the fence of the White House Lot.

It was now so dark that he could not distinguish the features of the last party, who stood over the way, silent and motionless as a statue.

Crewley was a little mystified.

"What's he got to do with it, I'd like to know? Wonder who he is?"

Suddenly, acting upon a resolution he had framed, he raised his voice to a key that broke in an unmusical squeak, and cried:

"I say—you—over there!"

The figure started, moved back a pace, but made no reply.

"I say—you! I'm Chris Crewley, all the way from Richmond, up a chimney! Can't you help me out?"

Then there was an answer to this cry—an answer that made the lawyer's heart thump.

"Is that you, Mr. Crewley?"

"Me? me?" he screamed, in delight; "of course it's me! Bless me, where did you land from? Come here, Waldron—round the edge of the house, where I can talk to you. Come on. Hang it! look what a fix I'm in. Can you see me?"—waving his arms so as to discover his exact situation.

Henry Waldron, with mind mazed in astonishment, went around to the side of the house, and looked upward at his friend, who was hanging half-way over the chimney-edge and gesticulating in frantic earnestness.

"Where did you drop from, Waldron? There!—I'm ready to howl! Look at me—I've been playing chimney-sweep! You ought to see me once! Can you make out where I am? Look—up here."

"Mr. Crewley!" Henry Waldron was lost in amazement.

"Yes, it's me; Chris Crewley—yours forever. Say, can't you help me out?"

"How on earth came you up there?" cried back the young man.

"All through following that actress girl! Had a fight this afternoon—a big negro and a devil of a hog. Lost my umbrella, too!"

"But, how did you ever get into such a fix as—"

"Beat me at a fair stand-up scrimmage!—fact! Knocked me lopsided—put a hole in the only hat I had, and then chucked me down in the cellar, right in the ash-heap! I'm all over dirt! Been up here since—but, I say, you've got to get me out. Hurry up!"

"I'll enter the house at once—"

"No, no, no—no!" interrupted Crewley, excitedly. "That won't do; they'd scalp you in a pair of seconds!"

"What's to be done, then?"

"Police!" was the laconic instruction.

"Ah! yes; I see," and Waldron turned quickly away.

"Fly! scoot! jump!" sung out Crewley, after him. "There's business ahead. Bring a whole posse—he's gone. Now, then"—longing to jump and crack his heels—for he forgot his gravity in the extreme exuberance of spirit which ensued upon his prospect of speedy deliverance—"I'll soon be out of this. He'll bring the police; then, down I go, into somebody's dormitory, like a sputter of gunpowder. Crewley, you vagabond, you're in for it. Wish he'd hurry. Sakes! how my limbs ache! If I only had my umbrella, now, I'd try to break a nose or two when I—"

He was cut short by a piercing shriek that half-curdled the blood in his veins, and slipping from his hold, he shot downward, while from his lips fell the usual exclamation:

"Bless me!"

In that unexpected transit his alert mind was made up to a course.

The cry told him of some one in danger; he knew the voice was a woman's.

Striking the bottom with an unpleasant thump, he gathered himself for any emergency ahead, and, with a tremendous kick,

sent the fireboard whizzing out into the apartment.

He saw the insensible form of Cecilia lying near; he saw Orle Deice in the act of springing forward to recover the knife which had been knocked from her grasp; he saw Herwin Reese clutching a chair for support, while from a ghastly wound in his throat the life-torrent was oozing, despite his efforts to stanch it; he saw Meg Semper struggling fiercely in the arms of the African—and as Nemil marked the lawyer's advent, the look on his black face seemed to say:

"Quick!—help here or I shall be worsted!"

All this he took in at a lightning glance, and then, with his heart in his throat, eyes distended, hair standing, and whole system fired as if by an electric flame, he dashed forward.

"Give me a hand!" he yelled, throwing himself upon the hag, and twining himself around her with the elasticity of an eel.

Nemil wrenched the murderous knife from the madwoman and hurled it across the room; then, like a mighty vise, his arms closed around her. Crewley was tied, arm and limb, with their howling antagonist. It is impossible to describe the way in which he coiled up and clinched Meg Semper in his hold.

She cursed and raved in her wrath; spitting, scratching, kicking; and, occasionally, from those shriveled, bloodless lips issued a sound like the yelp and bark of a savage wolf.

"Down her! Down her!" shouted Crewley, as he forced her chin up and placed one knee in the center of her back.

Nemil threw his whole enormous weight upon her, and all three went to the floor with a crash.

"Hold tight! Hold tight!" screamed the lawyer, as that convulsed and quivering form, not yet subdued, fought still with the desperation of her three-fold strength.

"She is mad!" snarled the African. "Take care, or she will bite!"

"Considerably man, I think!" Crewley sputtered. "But—I can't—help—that—hold still, now; hang it!" twisting one hand in her matted hair, and pinning her head down.

"Reginald! Reginald! Quick!—your assistance. It is a madwoman!"

Reginald Darnley stood in the doorway. It was Orle Deice who cried out, and as she did so, she pointed toward the combatants.

"Pitch in!" was all the lawyer could find time to utter, for Meg nearly sent him rolling over, by a sudden contraction of her body.

Reginald waited not to ask questions, but threw himself at once into the struggle—and none too soon, for the hag had loosed one arm from the negro's grip and struck Crewley a blow that half-blinded him.

"Hang it! if I had my umbrella, I'd ram it down your throat!" squealed the lawyer, as he buried his fingers in her scalp.

Hark! more to come yet. There was a sound of hurrying feet, and Henry Waldron, with two policemen at his side, bounded in among them.

But, he did not pause to aid those who were striving to conquer the crazed being; a pale, deathlike face had met his gaze, and, with a groan of fear, he sprung toward Cecilia.

Tenderly he raised her fair head, with its wreath of golden tresses, to his knee; gently he whispered to ears that were just then opening to sounds of life.

"Darling!"

A smile, a loving look answered that one passionate word.

"She's done for!" exclaimed a voice, and, glancing up, Waldron saw a group standing before a motionless body that lay stretched upon the floor.

Meg Semper had expired in a horrible spasm.

But, two parties who had figured in the tragical tableau were missing.

"Where's Rex Darnley? where's that queen of devilry?" Christopher Crewley spun round and looked in vain for those whose names he had uttered.

In the exciting moment of Meg Semper's death, the lovers slipped out. The cab Reginald had brought was at the door, and in it they were soon speeding away.

A physician was immediately sent for, to dress the dangerous cut in Reese's neck. When he arrived, the wounded man had fainted from loss of blood. It was only after weeks of dread uncertainty that he was pronounced safe, and so near had death hovered during his confinement to bed, that a wonderful change was worked in him. There is a quiet, respected clerk in one of the leading mercantile establishments in Richmond, whom we will call Herwin Reese; but, it is a vastly different man from the one who has acted throughout this narrative. He does not know, to this day, that, in attempting to destroy Reginald Darnley, he aimed at the life of his own brother!

The cold clay of Meg Semper was forwarded to Richmond, where it received private burial; Nemil paying expenses out of money he had hoarded up during his service with deceased. Then, finding himself alone, he counted over the greenbacks which his long, faithful obedience to the hag had enabled him to accumulate, and with a heavy pocket, struck a line for the American El Dorado.

There was a wedding a short time since, in Richmond, and, though the marriage notice might not have read: "Henry Waldron to Cecilia Bernard," still it was this couple—under their proper names—and both are ineffably happy.

Christopher Crewley was presented with a brand new hat and duplicate white umbrella, before he left Washington, and became thoroughly satisfied with the general disposition of things.

Perhaps, as we slacken the pen on this, the last page of our narrative, Reginald Darnley is amid the sparkling dews, sunny landscapes and beguiling airs of a foreign clime, with the beautiful girl by his side, whose passionate love, at last, triumphed, and made her the wife of the man she worshipped.

Merwin Darnley never learned to whom he owed his preservation from the poisoned glass—the lawyer, in an eccentric modesty, refraining from mention of his knowledge of the fiendish plot. As yet, it is clothed in mystery.

Whether the manufacturer will ever revoke the edict of his son's banishment, time has yet to show; but, if he did, it would be well; for, with one like Orle Deice to counsel and advise, it is safe to infer, that, the Reginald of years to come will be another than the once wayward votary of unbridled pleasure.

And now—but, wait a moment: one thing more. Christopher Crewley reached his native city in time to look after his "cow case," and, of course!—he won it.

THE END.

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